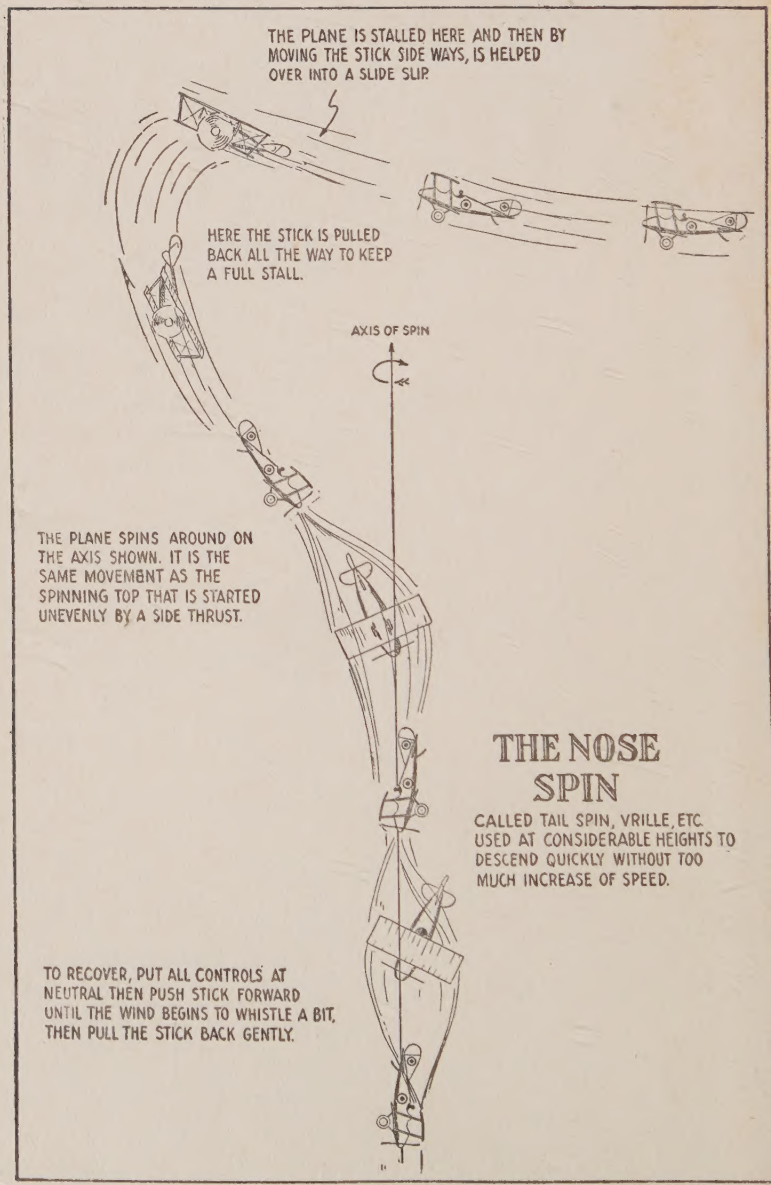
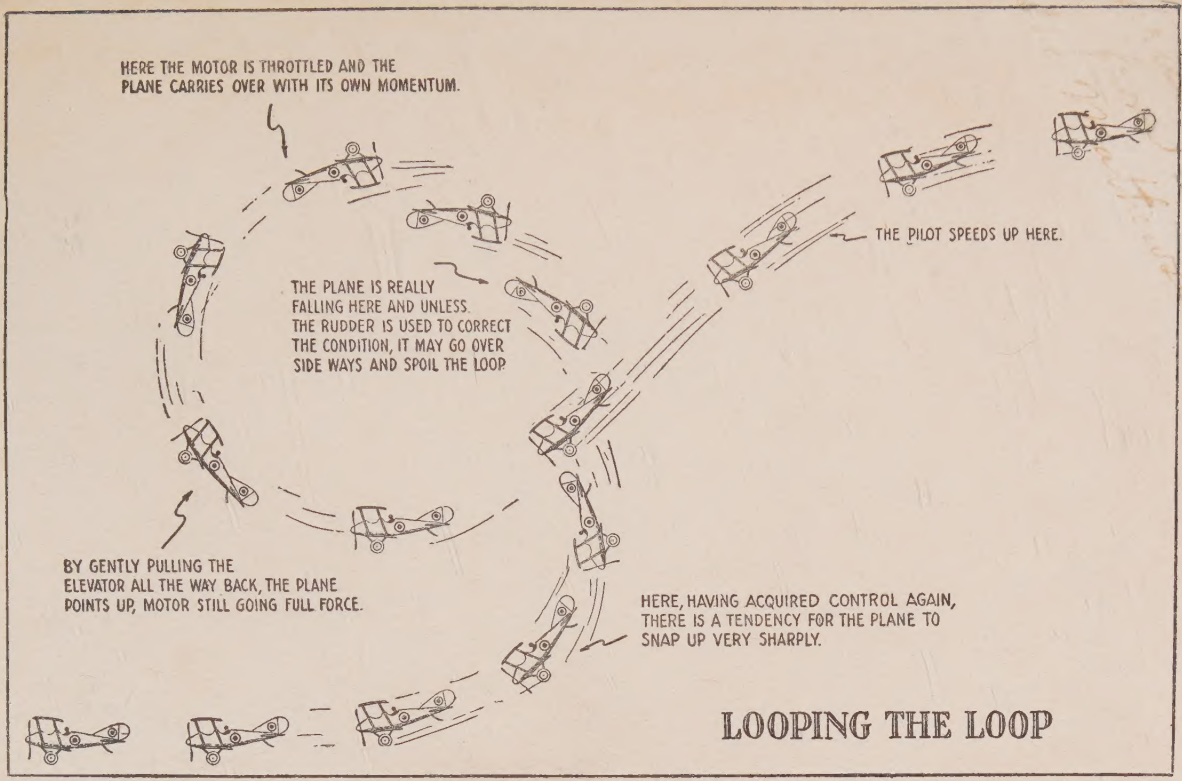
ACES UP

COVINGTON CLARKE


THE PLANE IS STALLED HERE AND THEN BY MOVING THE STICK SIDE WAYS, IS HELPED OVER INTO A SLIDE SLIP.
HERE THE STICK IS PULLED BACK ALL THE WAY TO KEEP A FULL STALL.
AXIS OF SPIN
THE PLANE SPINS AROUND ON THE AXIS SHOWN. IT IS THE SAME MOVEMENT AS THE SPINNING TOP THAT IS STARTED UNEVENLY BY A SIDE THRUST.
THE NOSE SPIN
CALLED TAIL SPIN, VRILLE, ETC. USED AT CONSIDERABLE HEIGHTS TO DESCEND QUICKLY WITHOUT TOO MUCH INCREASE OF SPEED.
TO RECOVER, PUT ALL CONTROLS AT NEUTRAL THEN PUSH STICK FORWARD UNTIL THE WIND BEGINS TO WHISTLE A BIT, THEN PULL THE STICK BACK GENTLY.


HERE THE MOTOR IS THROTTLED AND THE PLANE CARRIES OVER WITH ITS OWN MOMENTUM.
THE PILOT SPEEDS UP HERE.
THE PLANE IS REALLY FALLING HERE AND UNLESS THE RUDDER IS USED TO CORRECT THE CONDITION, IT MAY GO OVER SIDE WAYS AND SPOIL THE LOOP
BY GENTLY PULLING THE ELEVATOR ALL THE WAY BACK, THE PLANE POINTS UP, MOTOR STILL GOING FULL FORCE.
HERE, HAVING ACQUIRED CONTROL AGAIN, THERE IS A TENDENCY FOR THE PLANE TO SNAP UP VERY SHARPLY.
LOOPING THE LOOP

Aces Up

Other Books By Covington Clarke

For Valor

The Lost Canyon

The Phantom of Paradise Valley

Sea Dogs

ACES UP

By

COVINGTON CLARKE

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ACES UP

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"By the shore of life and the
gate of breath,
There are more things waiting
for men than death."

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ACES UP

CHAPTER I

The New Instructor

1

Tex Yancey, called "The Flying Fool" by his comrades in the —th Pursuit Squadron of the American Expeditionary Force, entered the mess hall with lips pressed into a thin, mirthless grin that seemed entirely inappropriate in one who was thirty minutes late to mess and must therefore make out with what was left. The other members of the squadron had finished their meal and were now engaged in the usual after-dinner practice of spinning some tall yarns.

Yancey stalked slowly to his place at the long table, but instead of seating himself stood with hands thrust deep into his pockets and with his long, thin legs spread wide apart. For a full minute he stood there, seeming to be mildly interested in the tale that Hank Porter was telling. But those who knew Tex, as did the members of this squadron, knew that the cynical smile on his thin lips was but the forerunner

of some mirthless thing from which only "The Flying Fool" would be able to wring a laugh. His was such a grotesque sense of humor; a highly impractical practical joke was his idea of a riotous time. Someone in the squadron, who had once felt the sting of one of his pranks, had called him a fool, and another member had responded, "Yeah, he's a fool, all right—but a flyin' fool!" The tribute had become a nickname, and Yancey rather reveled in it.

Just now his smile was masking some grim joke and his eyes held the mild light of pity.

"Well, Hank," he drawled at last, when Porter had wound up his story, "that yarn, as much as I get of it, would lead the average *hombre* to pick you out as a sho' 'nuff flyer. I would myself. Me, I'm easy fooled that way. I reckon all you buckaroos think you know somethin' about flyin', eh?"

Standing a full six feet two, he looked down upon them, the look of pity still in his eyes in strange conflict with the mirthless smile still on his lips.

"What's eatin' you?" Porter growled. "We can't help it because you're late for mess. Where've you been?"

Siddons and Hampden, not greatly interested in what they felt was some new strained humor on Yancey's part, pushed back from the table and started for the door, their objective being the French town of Is Sur Tille.

Yancey waited until they were near the door before he answered Porter.

"Oh, I've just been over to Is Sur Tille havin' a look-see at this new instructor that's comin' down here to teach us how to fly."

Siddons, with his hand upon the door, wheeled abruptly and studied Yancey's face, trying to discover the jest hidden behind that baffling, masking smile.

"Are you joking us?" he demanded from the doorway, but sufficiently convinced to turn back.

The "Flying Fool" smiled sweetly. "Why, Siddons, I wouldn't kid you-all about that sort o' thing," he drawled. "I saw him myself, in town, ridin' in a car with the C. O.* Like as not the Major will bring him in here this evenin' for a little chin-chin."

A suppressed growl arose from the other pilots.

"What is he coming here for?" young Edouard Fouche demanded, knowing the answer but anxious to have it brought out in the open where it could be attacked and vilified by all.

Yancey seated himself, tilted his chair back from the table and bestowed another sweet smile upon a room filled with scowling faces. It was a delicious moment—for Tex.

"Why, he's comin' here to teach you poor worms

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*For definitions of military and aeronautical terms, as well as certain slang peculiar to army life, see glossary at the back of the book.

how to fly. It seems that someone back in the States made a mistake in thinkin' we were pilots. We're here by accident. Ha! Ha! That's what we are—just accidents. Did you boys think we were sent over here to get all messed up in this little old war? Tut, tut! We're here just to add grandeur to the colorless scenery. Now be nice to this fellow when he comes. Maybe after he has labored with us for a while we'll be turned into ferry pilots and be sent to ferryin' planes up to the regular guys. I'm so glad I horned in on this scrap; it's so well planned and—and thrillin'."

More growls. Tex wasn't being at all funny. Indeed, if this ridiculous story were true, then it was the last straw on the camel's back. Had they not already suffered enough?

The squadron had been in France for two weeks, an interminable time to the restless group of young airmen who, booted and belted and ready for the fray, now found themselves suddenly faced with the prospect of still more training and when as yet they had not the haziest notion of the type of ship that was to be given them for mounts. One rumor had it that they were to get American ships powered by a much-talked-of mystery motor. Very well, but where were those ships? Another rumor, equally persistent, was to the effect that they were to draw French Spads. Very well again, but where were the Spads?

Still other rumors included Camels, Sopwiths, Nieuports and Pups. One rumor, uglier and more maddening than all the others, was to the effect that the entire squadron was to be used in observation work. Fancy that! A pursuit pilot being given a slow-moving observation crate with a one-winged, half-baked observer giving orders from the rear cockpit! It was enough to make a man wish he had joined the Marines. What was the good of all their combat training if they were to poke around over the front in busses that were meat for any enemy plane that chanced to sight them? It was enough to make a sane squadron go crazy, and the —th Pursuit Squadron was known throughout the service as the wildest bunch of thrill chasers ever collected and turned over to a distressed and despairing squadron commander.

Some swivel-chair expert must have been dozing when the order went through sending them to France. In wash-out records they were the grand champions. They had left behind them a long train of cracked props, broken wings, stripped landing gears—and a few wrecks so complete that the drivers thereof had been sent home in six foot boxes draped with flags. But whatever may be said against them, one thing was certain in their minds and in the minds of all who knew them: They could fly! To them, any old crate that could be influenced to leave the ground was

a ship, and they were willing to take it up at any time, at any place, and regardless of air conditions. Perhaps their record had been less black had they been given better ships.

A student, seeking a perfect cross-section of American youth, would have found this squadron an interesting specimen. War drums, beating throughout the land, had summoned them from the four points of the compass. How they had ever been assembled at one field is a problem known only to the white-collared dignitaries who sat in swivel chairs and shuffled their service cards. The result of the shuffle caused many a commander to tear his hair and declare that the cards had been stacked against him.

No two members of the squadron came from the same town or city; no two of them had the same outlook on life; no two members thoroughly understood one another. A Texan, such as Yancey, from the wind-swept Panhandle, may bunk with a world-travelled, well educated linguist, such as Siddons, and may even learn to call him Wart, but he never thoroughly understands him. A tide-water Virginian, such as Randolph Hampden, of the bluest of blue blood, may sit at mess by the side of a Californian, such as Hank Porter, but he will show no real interest in California climate and will never be able to make the westerner understand that Virginia is American history and not just a state. A nasal-voiced Ver-

monter, such as Nathan Rodd, brought up among stern hills and by sterner parents, will never fully understand a soft-voiced Louisianian, such as Edouard Fouche, who has found the world a very pleasant place with but few restrictions.

Leaving out the question of patriotism, the members had but three common attributes: They had scornful disregard for any officer in the air service who knew less of flying than they had learned through the medium of hard knocks; they were determined from the very beginning to get to France; and they were the most care-free, reckless, adventurous, devil-may-care bunch of stem-winders that had ever plagued and embarrassed the service by the simple procedure of being gathered into one group.

It may be that the War Department, in despair, at last thought to be rid of them by sending them overseas where their ability and proclivity for stirring up trouble could be turned to good account against the enemy. In any case, they were at last in France and from the moment of their landing had been exceedingly voluble in their demands for planes. They wanted action, not delay. And now that Yancey had brought word of this last crushing indignity, they opened wide the spigots of wrath, all talked at once, and the sum total of their comments contained no single word that could be considered as complimentary to management of the war. More instruction in

flying! It was unthinkable. But then, perhaps this grim joker, Yancey, was spoofing a bit.

"Come on, Wart," Hampden called to Siddons from the doorway. "Tex has just been listening to old General Rumor. I'd like right much to see this instructor before I get excited about it. Come on, let's go into town. The night's young—and so am I."

"You'll get excited when you see him," Tex responded, sagely.

"Who is he?" Nathan Rodd asked, which was about as long a sentence as Rodd ever spoke. He saved words as though they were so much gold.

"He's an English lieutenant," Tex answered. "Redheaded, freckle-faced, and so runty that he'd have to set on a stepladder to see out of a cockpit."

"A Limey!" chorused half a dozen incredulous, angry voices. "Whatdya know about that!"

Tex nodded solemnly. He was enjoying the situation. Inwardly, he was as furious as any of the others, but he had the happy faculty of being able to enjoy mob distress. "Yeah, a Limey! Some gink in town told me he was a famous ace. I forget his name. Never could remember names. But you boys'll love him. Like as not he'll let some of us solo after a month or so. Ain't the air service wonderful?"

More growls, and a half dozen muttered threats.

"Now boys, you-all be good, or Uncle Samuel'll send you back home and let you work in the shipyards at twenty per day. I'm surprised and hurt that you take this good news in this fashion. I should think you'd be delighted to have a Limey show you how he shot down a few of—"

"Attention!" Hampden called from the doorway, a warning quality in his voice.

The men looked up. There in the doorway stood Major Cowan, and by his side was a neatly uniformed, diminutive member of the Royal Flying Corps. The men scrambled hastily to their feet. Yancey upset his chair with a clatter as he unwound his long, thin legs from around the rungs.

Major Cowan, always maddeningly correct in military courtesies, turned upon Hampden with a withering look.

"Lieutenant," his voice had the edge of a razor but its cut was not so smooth, "do you not know that attention is not called when at mess?"

"Yes, sir."

"You do, or you do not?"

"Double negatives bother me right much," Hampden replied, his eyes on the English pilot and caring not a whit for court-martial now that he saw in the flesh the proof of Yancey's report, "but I do know the rule."

"Then observe it," Major Cowan responded, testi-

ly. "Gentlemen, this is Lieutenant McGee, of the British Royal Flying Corps, who has been assigned to us as flying instructor."

Lieutenant McGee felt that the room was surcharged with hostility, and he found himself in the position of one who is ashamed of the acts of another. Major Cowan, altogether too brusque, failed utterly to impress McGee, whose service in the Royal Flying Corps had been with a class of men who thought more of deeds than of rank and who could enjoy a care-free camaraderie without becoming careless of discipline. Discipline, after all, is never deeper than love and respect, and McGee felt somehow that Cowan was not a man to command either. McGee felt his face coloring, and tried to dispel it with a smile.

"I am glad to meet you, gentlemen," he said, "and I want to correct the Major's statement. I am not here as a flying instructor, in the strict sense of the word, but to give you, first hand, some of our experiences in formation flying, combat, and patrol work. I dare say you are all well trained. In fact, I have heard some rather flattering reports concerning you."

Yancey cast a sidelong glance at his neighbor; Siddons nudged Hank Porter. Porter pressed his foot against Fouche's boot. Not a bad fellow, this. Something like, eh?

Major Cowan was not one who could permit others

to roll the sweets of flattery under their tongues. He must qualify it with a touch of vinegar.

"Lieutenant McGee is modest concerning his duties," he said. "In fact, you will find all English officers becomingly modest."

"But I am not English!" McGee corrected. "I am an American—born in America, and that's why I have been so happy about this assignment."

Several members of the squadron began edging nearer. Perhaps things were not going to be so dreadful after all.

"Indeed?" Major Cowan lifted his eyebrows in surprise. The points of his nicely trimmed moustache twitched nervously as he began to wonder just how he should treat an American who happened to be wearing the uniform and insignia of a lieutenant in the R. F. C.

"My parents were English," McGee decided to explain, "but I was born in the States. When the war broke out, my brother, who was older by a few years, came over and joined the balloon corps. I was too young to enlist, but my parents were both dead and I came along with my brother, remaining in London until—" he hesitated and cleared his voice of a sudden huskiness, "until word came that my brother had been killed. His balloon was shot down while he was up spotting artillery fire. Naturally, I began to try to get in. I had to put over a fast one on the examin-

ing board, but I made it. And here I am at last, with my own countrymen. Top hole, isn't it?" His smile was so genuine and compelling that none could doubt the sincerity of his pleasure. All barriers of restraint were broken down. This chap actually courted conversation.

"Why don't you get repatriated, Lieutenant?" Yancey asked.

"The tactless fool!" Hampden thought, but dared not say. Of course the Texas clown would rush in where angels feared to tread. Didn't the fathead have any conception of pride of uniform and pride in a nation's accomplishments? Hampden felt that he would like to hit Yancey with one of the water carafes.

"What's that? Repatriated?" McGee repeated. "How can that be done?"

"Haven't you seen the General Order providing for it?" Tex continued, despite Major Cowan's silencing frown.

"I'm afraid not," McGee replied. "I've been pretty busy—and I don't get a great thrill out of G. O's. Tell me about it."

"Well—" Yancey began slowly, enjoying to the fullest the opportunity to provide information uninterrupted, "as you know, a lot of Americans joined the English and French air forces before we came in. Some of 'em, just like you, maybe, had a sort of

score to settle. But I reckon most of 'em went in because it offered something unusual and a lot of thrills. Huh! You tell 'em! Then when Uncle Sam got warm under the saddle and came hornin' in, a lot of the boys who'd come over and joined up began castin' homesick glances back in a westerly direction. Natural-like, Uncle Samuel is willin' to welcome home all his prodigal sons, if he can get 'em back, and he's specially forgivin' considerin' that his army at the beginnin' of hostilities is just about one day's bait on a real war-like front. As for flyers, he hasn't got enough of 'em, trained, to do observation work for an energetic battery of heavies. So he makes medicine talk with Johnny Bull and with France, and for once he comes out with all the buttons on his trousers. They agree to release all the Americans servin' under their colors who express a desire to get into O. D. under the Stars and Stripes. 'Repatriation' was the flossy name they gave it, but I call it homesickness. A lot of the wayward sons jumped at it quick, and we're 'way ahead on the game, any way you look at it. Now take some of those boys in the Lafayette Escadrille. Why, if they—"

Yancey's voice droned on, but McGee no longer heard what he was saying, though to all appearances he was paying courteous attention. But as a matter of fact his eyes were resting upon Lieutenant Siddons, and he was cudgelling his brain in an effort to

remember where he had seen him before. The blond, curly hair; the rather square face and brow; the thin lips, the calm, cold grey eyes; and the air of self-satisfied assurance, all were part of a memory which was vivid enough but which refused to come out of the back of the mind and associate itself with identifying surroundings. Where had he seen that face? New York? No, not there. He knew very few people in New York. Well, after all, perhaps it was only a strong resemblance. But resembling whom? Surely no one of his acquaintances looked like Siddons, at least none that he could remember.

McGee's gaze must have been a little too steady, at least enough to prove discomfiting, for Siddons half turned away and began speaking in whispers to Hampden. He talked out of the corner of his mouth, as one who is ashamed of the words he utters, and McGee felt the stirrings of a faint dislike for him.

Yancey reached the end of his monologue. The moment of silence that followed brought McGee sharply back to the present. He smiled graciously at the Texan.

"That's quite interesting," he said. "Strange I missed that order, and stranger still that no one mentioned it to me. But we've been pretty busy up in the Ypres salient—too busy to think much about what flag we were fighting under. I've enjoyed being with the English, but of course 'there's no place like

home'. I'm very happy to be assigned here, and I am glad Major Cowan gave me this chance to meet you. The Major tells me that you are to get several new Spads in the next two or three days. Until that time, I won't disturb you. I'm driving back into town. Anyone want a lift?"

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Hampden spoke up, "Siddons and I are going in. Have you room?"

"Certainly. Glad to have you along. Major Cowan, how about you?"

"Sorry," the Major replied, dourly, "but I have to pay the price of command by poring over a lot of detail work which would be spared me if I had a more efficient staff."

Mullins, the peppery little Operations Officer, felt the full force of the sting but he passed it off by winking wisely at Yancey. Why worry? Cowan was always looking for work and for trouble. He was never so happy as when bawling someone out.

McGee felt sorry for Mullins and sorrier still for Cowan. One with half an eye could see that Cowan was about as popular with his command as would be a case of smallpox. McGee had been trained in an atmosphere where discipline was a matter of example rather than a matter of fear, and as a result had always known a sort of good-fellowship which he felt instinctively would be impossible with such a commander as Cowan.

"I'm sorry you can't come with us, Major," McGee said in a voice that carried no conviction. "However, I must toddle along." He turned to Siddons and Hampden. "Ready? Right-O!"

During the short motor trip into Is Sur Tille, McGee's curiosity finally got the better of his natural dislike for admitting that his memory had failed him. "I think I have met you somewhere before, Lieutenant," he said to Siddons.

"Yes? I do not remember it," Siddons replied, with the air of one who is making no great draft upon his own memory. He himself evidently sensed the lack of courtesy, for he added, "New York, perhaps. Have you been around New York much?"

"No, I haven't. Somewhere else—"

Lieutenant Hampden's mellow laugh interrupted.

"Siddons has the idea that one never meets anyone outside of New York," he said. "He's terribly provincial, Lieutenant. He thinks there are only two places in the world—New York and everywhere else."

Siddons displayed no resentment at the taunt; he seemed quite well satisfied with the opinion expressed. In fact, he appeared quite satisfied with everything—especially with himself.

McGee wondered how a likeable chap, such as Hampden, could choose as companion one so utterly different in manner, in ideas, and in speech. But

then, war brings together strange bedfellows and establishes new standards. McGee dismissed the matter from his mind as the car swung into the narrow streets of the darkened town.

"Where can I drop you?" he asked.

"Going by the café down on the main drag?" Hampden asked.

"Right."

"That will be fine. I hope to see you again soon, Lieutenant."

"Thanks. The Spads are due to arrive on Monday. That's three days. See you then. Well, here we are," as the car swung in to the curb in front of the café. The shutters were closed, no light came from any of the stores or houses along the street, but from behind the closed door of the café came the sound of voices and laughter mixed with the metallic banging of a very old piano beating out tuneless accompaniment to a bull-voiced singer roaring through the many verses of "Hinkey Dinkey Parlez Vous".

"The Yank Marine went over the top,
Parlez Vous,
The Yank Marine went over the top,
Parlez Vous,
The Yank Marine went over the top
And gave old Fritz a whale of a pop,
Hinkey Dinkey, *Parlez Vous.*"

McGee smiled as he sat for a moment listening to

the words. All his service had been with the English, who of course had composed many songs highly complimentary to themselves, and only in the last few days had he come in contact with the forerunners of the mighty American army now pouring into French harbors from every arriving boat.

"Quite a fellow—this Yank Marine," he said to Siddons.

Siddons nodded, rather stiffly. "So it seems. Though he hasn't been over the top yet. Prophecy, I suppose." He stepped from the car to the curb with the bearing of one accustomed to being delivered in a chauffeur-driven car.

McGee was on the point of calling out, "When shall I call, sir?" but at that moment noticed young Hampden's genuine smile and heard him voicing words of appreciation for the lift.

"Don't mention it," McGee said. "It was a pleasure. Cheerio! old man!"

"There," he thought, sinking back in the tonneau. "I said 'old man'. Singular case, and that lets Siddons out rather neatly. Hum. I'll bet a cookie he knows more about flying than I do—or anyone else, for that matter. Well, we'll see. I wonder what sort of outfit Buzz drew."

Lieutenant "Buzz" Larkin was closer to McGee than any person in the world. Close bonds of friendship had been formed while they were in training in

Cadet Brigade Headquarters, at Hastings, England. During their months of service together in the Royal Air Force, on exceedingly hot fronts, those bonds of friendship had become bands of steel, holding them together almost as firmly as blood ties. Both were Americans, but the motives back of their entrance into the R. F. C. were as widely divergent as possible. Larkin, the son of a wealthy manufacturer, had never disclosed the real reason for his entrance into a foreign service. Perhaps he sought adventure. McGee, however, made no secret of the motives back of his entrance. When word reached him that his brother had been killed while doing observation work in a captive balloon, young McGee, not yet eighteen, employed a trick (which he thought justified) to gain entrance to the Air Force. He felt that he must carry on an unfinished work, and few will find fault with him if his actions were motivated by a slight spirit of revenge. After all, blood is thicker than water.

Whatever the motives of the two youths, once in the uniform of cadet flyers, the spirit of service seized them. Side by side, encouraging, entreating, helping and driving one another they plugged through their training with their eyes fixed upon the coveted reward of every air service cadet—a pair of silvered wings!

Together they had won their wings; together they

had gone to the front; together they had gone out on patrol, high above the lines, and met the enemy. Thereafter, the fortune of one was the fortune of both. Each had saved the other's life, the culminating tie in their friendship, if indeed their friendship needed any further tie.

Both had become aces, though in combat work McGee was easily the superior. This, however, he constantly denied and was forever admiring Larkin's work. Larkin, if inferior to McGee in a dog fight, was better disciplined. He could go up in formation, keep his eye on his flight commander, obey orders, and keep his head when he saw an enemy plane. McGee, on the contrary, went as wild as a berserker the moment he laid eyes on a plane bearing the black cross. Orders were forgotten and he dived, throttle wide open, stick far forward, every thought gone from his mind but the one compelling urge to get that other plane on the inside of his ring sight. McGee had his personal faults, but he was a faultless flyer. The same may be said of Larkin, for men in aerial combat never make but one vital mistake. Those who become aces have no great faults; those with great faults become mere tallies for the aces. Now and then, of course, the grim scorer nods during the game and a fault goes unpenalized, but as a rule it can be said that a man who can become an ace may well be called a faultless flyer, for an ace is one

who has rolled up a score of five victories against those whose skill was less than his own. Of course, there is the element of luck to be considered, for luck and skill must go hand in hand when youths go jousting in the clouds. But luck can only attend the skillful. With skill wanting, luck soon deserts.

Beyond doubt both McGee and Larkin had enjoyed a full measure of luck, and were still enjoying it. For example, wasn't it luck that had sent them both down here on the French front to act as instructors to newly arriving American squadrons? Wasn't it luck that they were still billeted together in the lovely old chateau at the edge of town, and could look forward to many, many more days together?

These latter thoughts were running through McGee's mind as his car swung under the trees lining the drive that led up to the chateau. Why, but for luck both of them might now be pushing up the daisies instead of being happily, and comparatively safely ensconced in such comfortable quarters. No more dawn patrols—for a while at least; no more soggy breakfasts—with comrades missing who banteringly breakfasted with you twenty-four short hours ago.

McGee's thoughts took unconscious vocal form as he stepped from the car. "Lucky? I'll say we are!"

"What did you say, sir?" asked the driver.

The question snapped McGee back to earth.

"I was complimenting myself upon some very nar-

row escapes, Martins, but I'll repeat—for your benefit. You are a very lucky boy."

Martins blinked. He held opposite views. "You think so, sir? I've gotta different idea. I wanted to be a pilot, like you, sir, and here I am toolin' this old bus around France with never a chance to get off the ground unless I run off an embankment. And this old wreck is no bird."

"So you really wanted to be a pilot, Martins?"

"I sure did, sir."

"Um-m. That's why I said you were a very lucky young man. I know the names of a lot of young fellows who wanted to become pilots—and did. But they've gone West now and their names are on wooden crosses. Hoe your own row, Martins, and thank the Lord for small favors."

"Yes, sir," aloud, and under his breath, "It's easy enough for them that has wings."

"How's that, Martins?" McGee asked, rather enjoying himself.

Martins fidgeted with the gear shift. "I said I had always wanted a pair of wings, sir."

"Well, be a good boy and maybe you'll get them—in the next world. Good night, Martins."

" 'Night—sir." Gurrr! went the clashing gears as the car got under way with a lurch that spoke volumes for the driver. It was tough to be held to the ground by a wingless motor.

McGee caught a gleam of light through the shutters of the upstairs windows. So Larkin was back already? He took the front steps in a jump and raced up the stairs in a manner most unbecoming to a First Lieutenant with a score of victories to his credit.

"What kind of an outfit did you draw, Buzz?" he demanded as he burst into the room.

Larkin was buried behind a Paris edition of the *Tribune*, his legs sprawled out into the middle of the floor where the heel of one boot balanced precariously on the toe of the other.

"Oh, so-so," never bothering to look from behind his paper. Phlegmatic old Buzz, McGee thought, what was the use of getting excited over an instructor's job?

"Are they good?" McGee asked.

"Um. Dunno." Still reading.

"Mine are great!" McGee enthused. "Stiff, crusty young C. O., who needs a couple of crashes—one fatal, maybe—but the rest of them are fine. Great bunch of pilots."

"Yeah?" Still reading, but doubtful. "See any of 'em fly?"

"No-o," slowly, "of course not."

"Um-m. Well, wait until they begin sticking the noses of those new Spads in the ground, and then tell me about 'em. They've been trained on settin' hens. Wait until they mount a hawk."

McGee jerked a pillow from the bed and sent it crashing through the concealing paper. "Old killjoy! If a man gave you a diamond you'd try it on glass to see if it was real."

Larkin began rearranging his crumpled paper. "Well, why not? If it wasn't real I wouldn't want it. And I wish you'd keep your pillows out of my theatrical news. I was just reading about a play at the *Folies Bergeres*, called 'Zig Zag'. They say it's a scream. By the way, Shrimp, how'd you like to fly to Paris to-morrow morning and give it the once over?"

"Fine, but—"

"But nothing! We can see it to-morrow night and be back the next day. That fine bunch of pilots of yours can't get off the ground until the Spads get here—and maybe not then."

"See here!" McGee challenged stoutly. "I'll bet you anything you like that those boys—"

"Will all be aces in a month," Larkin completed, knowing the extent and warmth of McGee's habitual enthusiasm. "All right, Shrimp, so be it. But what has that to do with the show? Want to go?"

"Sure. But what about passes? I don't know just who we are answerable to down here, in the matter of privileges and so forth. I've been sort of lost for the last few days."

Larkin shoved his hand into his inside blouse

pocket and brought forth two folded papers which he displayed proudly.

"Here are the passes—all jake! Marked official business and authorizing fuel and supplies, if needed. I'm a great little fixer. And about that question of not knowing who you are answerable to, don't forget that it's little Johnny Bull—capital J and B. You're liable to get jerked off this detail so quick you'll leave toothbrush and pajamas behind. Every morning now when I wake up and remember that I don't have to go out on dawn patrol I start pinching myself to see if I'm awake. Boy, in this game it's here to-day and gone to-morrow. Wasn't it old Omar who handed out that gag, 'Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend, before we too into the dust descend'? . . . Yeah? Well, he must have written that for war pilots. The minute J. B. finds out how comfortable we are down here we'll be recalled and sent to chasing Huns back across the line. In fact, I think we're both asleep and having nice dreams."

"That reminds me," McGee said, drawing up a chair and sitting gingerly on the edge after the manner of one about to indulge in confidential disclosures. "Have you heard anything of this repatriation business?"

"Sure. Haven't you?"

"Not a word."

"Where have you been? It came down in a G. O."

McGee scratched his head. "So I've just learned, but it's the first I've heard of it. Funny you didn't mention it to me."

Larkin eyed him curiously. "Well," slowly, "I knew you were English and—"

"But I'm not, and you know it!" McGee flared.

"Calm, brother, calm! I mean, I knew your father and mother were English, and so was your brother."

"But I was born in America. I'm just as much of an American as you are!"

"Calm, brother, calm! No one says you are not. But because of your family nationality, I supposed you would want to finish out the string with the R. F. C. and," he reached over and tousled McGee's mop of flaming red hair, "I'm just fool enough to want to stick around where you are—you little shrimp! So I thought I wouldn't bring up the subject."

McGee gave him a look of deep understanding and appreciation.

"Fact is," Larkin went on, "I just got a letter from Dad the other day and he seems to be pretty hot under the collar because I haven't made any move to get repatriated."

"Why haven't you?"

"You poor nut! I've just told you."

"No you haven't, Buzz. There is some reason deeper than that."

Larkin fingered his newspaper nervously and tried to simulate an interest in some news note. He hated to display sentiment, yet the fates had given him a double burden of it. As a matter of honest fact, he was as sentimental as a woman, and was forever trying to hide the fact behind a thin veneer of nonchalance and bluster.

"Did you see this communique from our old front?" he asked, trying to shift the subject. "They're having some hot fighting up there."

"Yes, I know. Things look pretty dark for the English. But answer my question: What is the real reason why you haven't thought of getting transferred into the United States forces?"

"I didn't say I hadn't thought of it," Larkin avoided. "Maybe I didn't want to trade horses in the middle of the stream."

"Any other reason?"

"Well, hang it all! a fellow builds up some pride in the uniform he wears. A good many of our buddies have gone out for their last ride in this uniform and—and it stands for a lot. Of course I am proud of my own country, and sometimes I feel a little strange in this uniform now that my own country is in the war, but it isn't a thing you can put on or take off just as the spirit moves you. It becomes a part of you. Say! What's eatin' you, anyway? Are you anxious to change uniforms?"

"Um-m. I'm not so sure. I like that bunch I met over there to-night."

"Yes, and they are all afoot. The truth is, our own country hasn't enough combat planes to send out a patrol. They are developing some mystery motor, I hear, but I'm not very keen about trying out any mystery motors. Our Camels are mystery enough to suit me. When I'm up against the ceiling with a fast flying Albatross or tri-plane Fokker on my tail, I don't want any mysteries to handle. No, Red, for the time being I guess I'm satisfied. Besides, they might chuck me in the infantry, and I have a horror of having things drop on me from overhead. Let's to bed, old topper, so we can hop off early in the morning. The sooner we start the sooner we get to 'Gay Paree'. Besides, early to bed and early to rise makes a man ready to challenge the skies. How's that for impromptu poetry?"

"Rotten! Omar and Ben Franklin both in one evening!" McGee yawned as he began pulling at a boot. "But it makes me sleepy. Go on, say me some more pretty pieces. Or maybe you'd like to sing me to sleep."

CHAPTER II

A Pass to Paris

1

THE following morning dawned with the quiet splendor and benediction which April mornings bring to the rural province of Côte d'Or. By the time the sun had climbed above the low hills to the east and was turning the dew covered fields into limitless acres of flashing diamonds and sapphires, McGee and Larkin had hurried through breakfast and were on their way out to the hangars where the mechanics, following Larkin's orders, would have the two Camels waiting on the line. As the car rolled along the smooth highway leading to the flying field, McGee sank back in the none too comfortable cushions and drank deep of the tonic of early morning.

"Some day!" he said. Larkin merely nodded—the only reply needed when Spring is in the air.

"It would be more fun to drive up to Paris," McGee offered.

Larkin looked at him in surprise. "Where'd you get that idea?"

"Well, nearly all of my impressions of France are

from the air. It stands for so many squares of green fields, of little rivers gleaming like silver ribbons interlaced through squares of green and brown plush, of torn up battlefronts where there is no life, no color—nothing but desolation. But this seems like another world. Here are spring flowers, the orchards are in bloom, and children are playing in the narrow streets of the towns. Flying over it, you look down on all that. You see it—and you don't see it. But in driving we would feel that we were a part of it. There's a difference. It gives you a feeling that you are better acquainted with the people, and you get a chance to smell something besides the beastly old Clerget motors in those Camels. I'm getting so I feel sick every time I smell burning oil. Let's drive up, Buzz."

Larkin, being in a different frame of mind, shook his head.

"No, you're too blasted poetic about it already. Besides, we have permission to fly up, not to drive. I suppose we could get the pass changed, but why fool with your luck? And the quicker we get there the more we see."

"All right, but on a day like this I could get more pleasure out of just wandering through the countryside than in seeing all the cities of the world rolled into one. Look!" he pointed to the flying field as the car turned from the highway. "There are the Camels,

warming up, and filling this good, clean air with their sickening fumes. Bah! I hate it!"

"Say, have you got the pip? You talk like a farmer. Snap out of it! We're headed for Gay Paree!"

The car had rolled to a stop at the edge of the field. McGee climbed out slowly. "All right, big boy. You lead the way. And no contour chasing to-day. I'm too liable to get absent-minded and try to reach out and pick some daisies. Besides, this motor of mine has been trickier than usual in the last few days despite the fact that the Ack Emma declares she is top hole. So fly high and handsome. Know the way?"

Larkin was crawling into his flying suit and did not answer.

"Know the way?" McGee repeated.

"Sure. That's a fine question to ask a pilot bound for Paris. We land at Le Bourget field, you know."

"No, I didn't know."

"Where'd you think you'd land—in the Champs Elysees?"

"I'm liable to land on a church steeple if that motor cuts out on me as it did yesterday afternoon—for no reason at all. Remember, no contour chasing and no dog-fighting. We're going to Paris."

Larkin grinned. Rarely did they go into the air together but what they engaged in mimic warfare—dog-fighting—before their wheels again touched the ground. It was the airman's game of tag, the winner

being that one who could get on the other's tail and stay there. It was a thunderous, strut singing game wherein the pursued threw his plane into fantastic gyrations in a frenzied, wild effort to shake off the pursuer and get on his tail. It was a game in which McGee excelled. Although Larkin recognized this fact, he was always the first to start the dog fight and had never found McGee unwilling to play. As for contour chasing—well, they had broken regulations times without number, and to date had paid no penalty.

McGee, knowing what thoughts lurked behind Larkin's grin, wagged a prudent finger under his nose.

"Mind your step, Buzz," he warned. "We are supposed to be sedate, dignified, instruction-keeping instructors. Fly northwest to Auxerre, then follow the railroad toward Sens and on to Melun. Then swing straight north and come into Le Bourget from the east."

"All right. All set?"

"Yes. You lead off and I'll follow. Wait! On second thought I think I'll lead and pick my own altitude. And if you start any funny business, I'll leave you flat!"

They climbed into the waiting planes, whose motors were still warming idly. Members of the ground crew took up their stations at the wing tips. McGee was on the point of nodding to the crew to remove

the wheel chocks when he remembered that for the first time in his experience as a pilot he had climbed into the cockpit without first casting an appraising eye over braces, struts and turn buckles. He promptly cut the motor and climbed from the plane, saying, half aloud; "I must be getting balmy. It's the weather, I guess."

"How's that, sir?" asked the air mechanic.

"I say, it's balmy weather we're having."

"Oh! Yes, sir."

"You've checked her all over, Wilson?"

"Yes, sir. And fueled her according to Lieutenant Larkin's instructions."

"Hum." McGee slowly walked around the plane, giving every functional detail a critical look, nor was he the least hurried by the fact that Larkin was displaying impatience. Satisfied at last, he climbed back into the plane. A member of the ground crew took his place at the propeller.

"Petrol off, sir?"

"Petrol off."

Whish! Whish! went the prop as the helper began pulling it over against compression.

"Contact, sir!"

"Contact."

The motor caught, coughed, caught again and the prop whirled into an indistinct blur. The sudden blast of wind sent clouds of dust eddying toward the

hangar, but ahead lay the cool, fresh, dew-washed green of the field. McGee turned to look once more at the wind sock which, for want of a breeze, hung limp along its staff. He nodded to the men at the wheel chocks, waved his hand to Larkin and gave her the gun.

No pilot in the service could lift a Camel off the ground quicker than could McGee, but this morning he taxied slowly forward and was getting dangerously near the end of the field before he began to get the tail up.

Larkin, watching him, chuckled. "Guess he wants to take a spin on the ground," he commented to himself. "Fancy that bird wanting to go to Paris by motor!" Then to show how little he thought of the ground he advanced his throttle rapidly and took off on far less space than should ever be attempted by one who knows, from experience, how suddenly a crowded Clerget-motored Camel can sputter and incontinently die. And as a parting defiance to his knowledge, Larkin pulled back his stick and zoomed. Altitude was what McGee wanted, eh? Well, here was the way to get altitude in a hurry.

McGee, glancing backward, saw the take-off and the zoom. "The poor fish!" was his mental comment. "If he shows that kind of stuff to this squadron they'll be needing a lot of replacements—or yelling for a new instructor."

But the appreciative ground crew, watching, expressed a different view. "Boy!" exclaimed an envious Ack Emma. "Can that baby fly! I'll tell the world! Watch him out-climb McGee. Did you see how McGee took off? Like a cadet doin' solo—afraid to lift her. And they say he's one of the best aces in the R. F. C. Huh! I think he's got the pip! Ever since he first touched his wheels to this 'drome he's been yellin' about his motor bein' cranky. And it's all jake. She takes gas like a race horse takes rein."

"Yeah," growled a mechanic by the name of Flynn, who by nature and nationality stood ready to defend anyone bearing the name of McGee, "a lot you know about those little teapots in them Camels. You was trained on Jennies and—and Fords! What you know about a Clerget engine could be written on the back of a postage stamp. Say, do you know why he took her off so gentle? Well, I'll spread light in dark places, brother. He took off slow because he *knew* you didn't know nothin', see?"

"Say, listen—"

The quarrel went on, despite the fact that the two pilots constituting the meatless bone of contention were rapidly becoming specks in the sky to the northwest.

At five thousand feet McGee leveled off and swung slightly west. He looked back and up. Larkin was

five hundred feet above him and somewhat behind, but at McGee's signal he dived down, taking up a position on the left. In this manner they could point out objects below and engage in the sign language which they had perfected through many hours spent in the air together.

As they flew along McGee felt his spirits mounting. It was a good world to live in and life was made especially sweet and interesting by the soft unfolding greens of a land brought to bud and blossom by April's sun and showers. In the beautiful panorama below there was nothing to indicate that a few miles to the eastward mighty armies were striving over a tortured strip of blasted land that for years to come would lie fruitless and barren. Here all was peace, with never a hint—yes, far below on the white ribbon of roadway a long, dark python was slowly dragging itself forward. It was a familiar sight to Larkin and McGee—troops moving up to the theatre of war. And over on another road a long procession of hump-backed brown toads were plodding eastward. Motor lorries, carrying munitions and supplies. Strange monsters, these, to be coming from the green fields and woods of a seeming peaceful countryside. Forward, ever forward they made their way. Never, it seemed to McGee, had he seen roads choked with returning men and munitions. Was the maw of the monster there to the eastward bottomless and insati-

able? Where were the roads that led men back to the land of living, green things?

As they passed over a town, McGee saw Larkin point down. On the outskirts of the village a great cross in a circlet of green marked the location of a military hospital. Ah! . . . Yes, some came back. But even then they must brand their pain-racked sanctuary with the mercy imploring emblem of the Red Cross so that enemy planes, bent on devastation, would mingle mercy with hope of victory and save their bombs for those not yet carried into the long wards where white-robed doctors and nurses battled with death and spoke words of hope to the hopeless.

It was a sorry world! McGee, who but a few short minutes ago was entranced by the beauty of the world, now felt a sudden, marked disgust. He pulled his stick back sharply. He would climb out of it! He would get up against the ceiling, where the world became a dim, faint blur or was lost altogether in a kindly obliterating ground haze.

On McGee's part the action was nothing more than an unconscious reaction to distressing thoughts. Larkin, however, on seeing the sudden climb, grinned with delight. This climb for altitude was nothing more than the prelude to a dive that would start them into a merry game of hare and hound. So McGee had forgotten all about his doleful sermon against dog-

fighting? And so soon. Ha! Trust the freckled "Little Shrimp" to feel blood racing through his veins when motors are singing sweetly.

Instead of following, Larkin decided to nose down and offer more tantalizing bait.

McGee, seeing the dive, found it more than he could resist. Besides, a merry little chase would serve to wash the brooding thoughts from his mind. This was a morning for sport, for jest, for youth—for hazard!

Forward went the stick and he plunged down the backwash of Larkin's diving plane, his motor roaring its cadenced challenge. This was something like! Sky and ground were rushing toward each other. The braces were screaming like banshees; the speed indicator hand was mounting with a steady march that made one want to dive on and on and on until—

Larkin, in the plane ahead, brought his stick backward as he made ready to go over in a tight loop. McGee smiled and followed him over. When they came out of the loop they were in the same relative position—Larkin the hare, McGee the tenacious hound.

For the next few minutes the open-mouthed countrymen in the fields below were treated to a series of aerial gymnastics which must have sent their own pulses racing and which might well serve them for fireside narration for years to come.

The two darting hawks Immelmanned, looped, barrel-rolled, side-slipped, and then plunged into a dizzy circle in which they flew round and round an imaginary axis, the radius of the circle growing ever shorter and shorter. Every action of the leading plane was immediately matched by the pursuer.

Larkin, realizing that his skill in manoeuvering was something less than McGee's, decided to bring the contest to a close with a few thrills in hedge hopping.

Of all sports that offer high hazard to thrill satiated war pilots, that of hedge hopping, or contour chasing, occupies first place. This is particularly true when the pilot is flying a Sopwith Camel powered by the temperamental Clerget motor with its malfunctioning wind driven gasoline pump. The sport had been repeatedly forbidden by all the allied air commands, but these commands had to deal with irrepressible youth, which has slight regard for doddering old mossbacks who think that a plane should be handled as a wheel chair.

Larkin dived at the ground like a hawk that has sighted some napping rodent, and so near did he come that by the time he had leveled off, his wheels were almost touching the ground—and wheels must not touch when one is screaming through space at the rate of a hundred and forty miles per hour.

He glanced back. Sure enough, McGee was still on his tail. No hedge hopping, eh? Huh! Trust

The Shrimp to keep young, he thought. Fat chance they had of getting old. Who ever heard of an old war pilot? Ha! That's a good one! And here's a double row of tall poplars fringing the road directly ahead. Hold her close to the ground and then zoom her at the last minute . . . landing gears just clearing the topmost branches . . . make it, and that's hedge hopping. Fail to make it—and that's bad news!

Larkin made it, a beautiful zoom that carried him over the trees by a skillful margin. Then he swooped down again, skimming along the level field on the other side of the road.

McGee's zoom was just as spectacular and as nicely timed, but as his nose climbed above the first row of trees his motor died as suddenly as though throttled by the strangling hands of some unseen genii. Sudden though it was, McGee had sensed that he was crowding the motor too much and had tried to ease her off and still clear the trees. It was too late to relieve the choked motor but he did clear the first row of trees. He was about to close his eyes against the inevitable crash into the poplars on the other side of the road when he saw that two of the trees had been felled, and that so recently that the woodsmen had not yet worked them up. There was one clear chance left. If only he could slip her over just far enough to clear the outstretched limbs of the tree to the right.

At such a time seconds must be divided into hun-

dredths, and action must be instantaneous, instinctive, and without flaw. McGee felt one of the spreading limbs brush against his right wing tip, felt the plane swerve for a moment, then respond to rudder and aileron. It was a case where one moment he was supremely thankful for flying speed, and the next, as the ground of the level field was flashing under the wheels, wishing that he had held to his resolution concerning hedge hopping.

The wheels struck hard. The plane bounded, high, and again the wheels touched. Again the plane bounded, and this time came down with a shock that left McGee amazed with the realization that the undercarriage was intact and that he still had a chance to keep her off her nose if only he could get the high-riding tail down.

Crash! Crack! The tail was down now . . . and broken to splinters, like as not. Never mind. . . . By some great mercy he was at last on three points and rolling to a stop.

He suddenly felt very weak. A narrow squeeze, that! Stupid way for an ace—and an instructor—to get washed out. Like a warrior falling off his horse while on the way home from a victorious field.

He saw Larkin bank his ship into a tight turn, set the plane down in a perfect landing and come careening down the open field to stop within a dozen paces of McGee's plane.

Larkin, white-faced, tight-lipped, crawled from his plane and came forward on the double-quick. Not a word did he speak until he stood by the side of Red's plane, his hands gripping the leather piping at the edge of the cockpit until his knuckles were white.

"What happened, Red? Gee, you're white! All the freckles gone."

"Lucky I'm not gone!" McGee answered. "My knees are too shaky to crawl out yet. It looked like *finis la guerre pour moi* for a second." He turned and blew a kiss at the gap in the trees. "Thanks, Mr. Woodchopper, whoever you are. Buzz, never repeat that old poem about 'Woodman, spare that tree!' If he had spared those two—well! Take a look at my tail skid, Old Timer. Is it broken off?"

"No. It's cracked and sort of cockeyed, but a piece of wire from that fence over there will fix it all O. K. What happened?"

McGee fixed him with a baleful glare. "You should ask—with as much experience as both of us have had with these tricky motors. I choked it down, that's all. That same little fault has sent many a pilot home in a wooden box. Go get me a piece of that wire. We'll fix the skid, somehow, and when I get to Le Bourget I'll set her down on two points. And listen! From here on in we do—"

"No contour chasing," Larkin completed, forcing a thin smile. "Seems I heard that somewhere before.

Crawl out, Shrimp. You said you wanted to be out among the flowers and sweet things. Well, here's a sweet thing, and this field is full of flowers. I brought you down low so you could enjoy them."

"Yeah! I said I wanted to be among 'em—not pushing 'em up. Hurry over and get that wire before I do something violent."

2

Thirty minutes later two chastened pilots took off from the level field, with a half dozen curious French peasants for an audience, and laid a straight course for Le Bourget. No more acrobatics and no more hedge hopping. To an observer below they would have resembled two homing pigeons flying rather close together and maintaining their positions with a singleness of mind and purpose.

When they reached Le Bourget they circled the 'drome once, noted the wind socks on the great hangars, and dropped as lightly to the field as two tardy, truant schoolboys seeking to gain entrance without attracting notice.

A newly arrived American squadron was stationed at the field, jubilant over the fact that they were trying their skill on the fast climbing, fast flying single-seater Spads. Five of these swift little hawks were now on the line, making ready for a formation flight.

McGee and Larkin introduced themselves to the officer in command, presented their passes and authority for refueling, and McGee requested that his tail skid be repaired and his motor checked over.

"Let's stick around and watch this formation flight," McGee then said to Larkin. "I want to see what these lads can do with a real ship."

"All right, but don't get goggle-eyed. I came up here to see Paris, and I'm thirty minutes behind time now."

The take-off of the five Spads was good, and in order. McGee noticed with considerable satisfaction that the flight commander knew his business, and the four planes under his direction followed his signaled orders with a precision that would have been creditable in any group of pilots.

"Nice work!" Red said to an American captain who seemed not at all impressed.

The captain was six feet tall, burdened by the weight of rank and the ripe old age of twenty-four or twenty-five years, and was somewhat skeptical of McGee's judgement. He wondered, vaguely, what this youthful, freckle-faced, five-foot-six Royal Flying Corps lieutenant could know about nice work. Why, he couldn't be a day over eighteen—in fact, he might be less than that. A cadet who had just won his wings, probably.

"Oh, fair," the captain admitted.

McGee, sensing what was running through the captain's mind, and having no wish to set him right, winked at Larkin and said:

"Let's go, Buzz. It isn't often that two poor ferry pilots get a twenty-four hour leave."

Later, as they were bounding cityward in a decrepit, ancient taxi driven by a bearded, grizzled Frenchman who without make-up could assume a role in a drama of pirates and freebooters, McGee said to Larkin:

"You know, Buzz, I think a lot of these American pilots are better prepared for action right now than we were when we got our wings. And we had hardly gotten ours sewed on when we were ordered to the front. These fellows will give a good account of themselves."

"I think so, too. Do you remember how the Cadets of our class were sent up for solo in rickety old planes held together by wire, tape and chewing gum? Poor devils, they got washed out plenty fast! I've seen 'em go up when the expression on their faces told that they had forgotten everything they had learned. No wonder a lot of them took nose dives into the hangars and hung their planes on smokestacks and church steeples."

McGee frowned, remembering some of the friends who had tried for their wings and drew crosses instead. Quickly he threw off the mood with a laugh.

"Yes, and I was one of those 'poor devils' who forgot. I'll never forget *that!* I had no more right being up in that old Avro than a hog has with skates. But England needed pilots and needed them badly. I guess it was a case of 'what goes up must come down' and the government gave wings to the ones who came down alive. The others got angels' wings."

"I suppose so. And before another month passes the need will be greater than ever. Look what the Germans did to the British Fifth Army just last month. I'll never know what stopped 'em. But they're not through. What do you make of that long range gun that is shelling this very city?

"Um-m. Dunno. Seems to me that well directed reconnoissance flights should be able to locate that gun."

"Maybe; but locate it or not, its purpose is to drive war workers out of Paris, cripple the hub of supplies and make it more difficult for us to coordinate the service of supplies through here when they make their drive at Paris. It'll come within a month. Then we'll need every pilot and every ship that can get its wheels off the ground. I'm tellin' you—a month!"

"Think so?"

"I know so! America is going to have her big chance—and may the Lord help us if she doesn't deliver! I don't know how many combat troops she has landed, but I do know that her eyes, the air ser-

vice, is in need of ships. The French and English are willing to give them all the old, worn out flying coffins that they can pick up out of junk heaps—old two-seater Spads, old A. R's, 1½ strutter Sopwiths, and crates like that. If they can get new Spads, like those we saw 'em flying this morning, or Nieuport 28's, or the Salmsons which their commander has been trying to get, then all will be jake. Otherwise—" he shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"Otherwise," McGee took advantage of the pause, "Otherwise they'll deliver just the same, even if they have to fly Avros, Caudrons or table tops. Buzz, these Americans over here have fight in their eyes. They've got spirit."

"Yes, but spirit can't do much without equipment."

"Huh! Ever read any history?"

"What's on your mind now, little teacher? I read enough to pass my exams in school."

"Then you've forgotten some things about American history, especially about spirit and equipment. Where was the equipment at Valley Forge? What about the troops under Washington that took the breastworks at Yorktown without a single round of powder—just bayonets? What about the war of 1812, when we had no army and the English thought we had no navy? You don't remember those—"

"That's just what I do remember," Buzz interrupted, "and that's what I'm howling about. We

never have been prepared with anything except spirit. Right now we have a lot of good pilots over here and the air service is having to beg planes from the French and English. And here we are, sent down to this front to act as instructors to a shipless squadron, at the very time when the Germans are making ready for another big drive. It's all wrong. Every minute is precious."

McGee had been looking out of the window of the swaying, lurching cab that was now threading its way through hurrying traffic. "Forget it!" he said. "Give Old Man Worry a swift kick. Here we are in Gay Paree. The war's over for twenty-four hours!"

3

To all allied soldiers on leave of absence from the front, Paris represented what McGee had voiced to Larkin—a place where the war was over for the time limits of their passes. Forgotten, for a few brief hours, were all the memories of military tedium, the roar of guns, the mud of trenches, the flaming airplane plunging earthward out of control—all these things were banished by the stimulating thought that here was the world famous city with all its amusements, its arts, its countless beauties, open to them for a few magic hours.

The fact that Paris was only a ghost of her former

self made no impression on war-weary troopers. What mattered it, to them, that the priceless art treasures of the Louvre had been removed to the safety of the southern interior? Was it their concern that the once mighty and fearless Napoleon now lay blanketed by tons of sand bags placed over his crypt to protect revered bones from enemy air raids or a chance hit by the long range gun now shelling the city? What mattered it that famous cafés and chefs were now reduced to the simplest of menus; what difference did it make if the streets were darkened at night; who that had never seen Paris in peace time could sense that she was a stricken city hiding her sorrow and travail behind a mask of dogged, grim determination?

Paris was Paris, to the medley of soldiers gathered there from the four points of the compass, and it was the more to her credit that she could still offer amusement to uniformed men and boys whose war-weary minds found here relief from the drive of duty.

Everywhere the streets were swarming with men in uniform—French, English, Australian, Canadian, New Zealanders, colored French Colonials, a few Russians who, following the sudden collapse of their government, were now soldiers lacking a flag, Scotch Highlanders in their gaudy kilts, Japanese officers in spick uniforms not yet baptized in the mud of the trenches—a varied, colorful parade of young men bent on one great common objective.

At night, the common magnet was the theatre, and the *Folies Bergeres*, featuring a humorous extravaganza, Zig Zag, in which was starred a famous English comedian, drew its full quota of fun-seeking youths.

It was this show that McGee and Larkin had come to see, and at the end of the first act they were ready to add their praises to the chorus of approval. During the intermission they strolled out into the flag bedecked foyer to mingle with a crowd that was ninety per cent military and which was in a highly appreciative frame of mind. One particularly pleasing note had been added rather unexpectedly when one of the feminine stars, in singing "Scotland Forever," had been interrupted by a group of Highlanders who boosted onto the stage a red-headed, bandy-legged, kilted Scotchman who had the voice of a nightingale. And when, somewhat abashed, he took up the refrain, he was joined by a thunderous chorus from the audience that made the listeners certain that Scotland would never die so long as such fervor remained in the hearts of her sons. The English soldiers, not to be outdone, had followed with "God Save the King" and then, down the aisle with a flag torn from the walls of the foyer stalked an American sergeant, holding aloft Old Glory and leading his countrymen in the singing of "The Star Spangled Banner."

Trust a group of soldiers to take charge of a show

and run it to suit themselves. But they were pleased, beyond question, as was evidenced by the buzzing conversations during the intermission.

"Great show, eh?"

"I'll tell the world!"

"Hey, Joe! You old son-of-a-gun! How'd you get down here? Thought you were wiped out up at Wipers."

"Huh! Not me! They haven't made the shell that can get me. Look who's over there with a nice cushy wound to keep him out of trouble. Old Dog Face himself. Hey! Dog Face . . . Come here!"

Such were the greetings of soldiers who hid their real feelings behind a mask of flippancy.

McGee drew Larkin into an eddy of the milling throng where they could the better watch what Red termed "the review of the nations." A strapping big Anzac, with a cockily rosetted Rough Rider hat, strolled arm in arm with a French Blue Devil from the Alpine Chasseurs. A kilted Highlander, three years absent from his homeland and bearing four wound stripes on his sleeve, was trying vainly to teach the words of "Scotland Forever" to a Russian officer whose precise English did not encompass the confusing Scotch burr. Mixed tongues, mixed customs, variety of ideals; infantrymen, cavalrymen, artillerymen, war pilots; men with grey at the temples and beardless youths; here and there a man on crutches, here

and there an empty sleeve, and many breasts upon which hung medals awarded for intrepid courage; here grizzled old Frenchmen with backs bowed by three years of warfare, and there fresh, clean young Americans recently landed and a little amazed that they should be looked upon as the hope of the staggering allies. Color, color, color! Confused tongues, the buzz and babble of a thousand half-heard conversations, the fragments of marching songs! Here was a cross section of the Allied Armies, all of them with but one purpose. How could they fail!

The scene had a telling effect upon McGee and Larkin. Wordless, for a few minutes, they stood watching the throng. It was McGee who spoke first.

"Did you ever see anything like it, Buzz? Just look at the different uniforms. There—look over there! A bunch of American Blue Jackets. Wonder how they got here?"

"Humph! Wonder how all of us got here? That's what I've been thinking about. This is just a moment snatched from the lives of all these fellows. What went before? What homes did they come from, and who is waiting for them? And what comes to them to-morrow? Gee!" He shook his head, slowly. "It doesn't do to think about it. You want to find out about them . . . and you get to wishing they could all go on back home to-morrow. Say, who started this talk, anyhow? Come on, let's go back in."

"Wait a minute!" McGee seized his arm and turned him around. "There's plenty of time before the curtain. Look, Buzz. See that black fellow over there in French Colonial O. D.? Came from Algiers, I guess, or Senegal, maybe. What brought him here, and what sort of stories will he tell . . . when he gets back home? Will he tell about what he did, or will he talk about what he saw and what others did?"

"Dunno. Why?"

"Well, this has set me to thinking. We're all here on exactly the same business. The uniform doesn't count so much, nor does the branch of the service. It's just a question of getting the job done—a sort of 'Heave Ho! All together, now!' Get me?"

"Yes—I guess so. What are you driving at?"

"This. See that American sergeant over there—the one who carried the flag down the aisle and jumped up on the stage?"

"Yes. Big fellow, isn't he?"

"You said it! The biggest duck in this puddle, in more ways than one. And I want to get into the uniform he is wearing. Understand, Buzz? Oh, I'm proud enough of the one I'm wearing, but when he started the national anthem, and they all came in on that chorus, 'Oh, say can you see, by the dawn's early light,'—well, I felt cold shivers running up and down my backbone. None of the other songs did that to me. Do you get me, Buzz?"

"Sure. I felt it, too." He put both his hands on Red's shoulders, holding him off at arm's length. "You want back under the old Stars and Stripes, don't you? . . . you little shrimp!"

"Yes," slowly, "and—yet—"

"I know how you feel. I'm with you, fellow, when you get ready to make the change."

McGee's eyes lighted with surprise and joy. "Really, Buzz?"

"Surest thing you know!"

"And you don't think we'd feel like—like—"

"We'd feel like two Americans, *going home*. Shake, little feller! There, I feel better already. Come on, let's go in; that's the curtain bell."

CHAPTER III

Night Raiders

1

On the following Tuesday morning a group of two Spads and several Nieuports were delivered to Major Cowan's pursuit squadron at Is Sur Tille. A Lieutenant Smoot, one of the ferry pilots who had flown up one of the Nieuports, sought to ease the pain caused by his own lowly calling by taunting Tex Yancey—an extremely dangerous pastime, for Tex had a ready tongue.

"When you buckoes have washed out these planes," he said, "the Old Man will see the error of his way and send us up to do the real flying. What's left of this gang will then be put to ferrying. Did any of you ever see a Spad or Nieuport before?"

Yancey, standing well over six feet, looked down on him pityingly. "Did you say your name was Smoot, or Snoot? Smoot, eh. Well, transportation *to the rear* is waitin' for you at headquarters. Don't let me keep you waitin'. I'm surprised you're not pushin' a wheelbarrow in a labor battalion, the way you set that Nieuport down a few minutes ago. Clear out,

soldier! This squadron is gettin' ready to do some plain and fancy flyin'. I don't want you to have heart trouble."

"Humph! You'll have heart trouble the first time you try to land one of those Spads. You'll think you have been trained on a peanut roaster. Who's the Britisher over there snooping around with Cowan?"

"Name's McGee. But he's not a Limey; he's an American. I'm told he won a coupla medals in the R. F. C., and has sixteen Huns to his credit. He must be good—though he doesn't wear the medals to prove it. Not a bit of swank."

"What's he doing here?"

"He's an instructor," Yancey replied without hesitation.

"Oh Ho! So you still need instruction? I heard that Cowan knows it all."

"Naw, he only knows half, and you know the other half. Too bad both sets of brains wasn't put in one head. In that case somebody would have been almost half-witted. Better toddle along, soldier. The animals are goin' on a rampage in a minute."

"Yeah? Well, turn 'em loose. I'm something of a big game hunter myself. What sort of a flyer is this instructor?"

"Dunno. We'll see in a minute, maybe. He's crawling in that Spad. Yep, they're turnin' her

around. Don't go now. You can learn a lot here."

During the next ten minutes the entire squadron, and the ferry pilots, were given an excellent opportunity to form their own conclusions about McGee's ability to fly. He took the Spad aloft, in test, and plunged through a series of acrobatics that served to convince all watchers that here was a man whose real element was the air. Ship and man were one.

The group on the ground watched, open-mouthed, despite the fact that they themselves were flyers of no mean ability. But they had never flown such ships as the Spads, and the prospect and possibilities made their hearts race with feverish eagerness to take off in one of these trim little hawks.

Yancey and Smoot had now joined the watching group around Major Cowan, and as McGee rolled at the top of a loop, Yancey turned to the doubting ferry pilot.

"Yes, I think he can fly. What do you think, brother? When you can do stick work like that, you'll be sent up here to join us."

Major Cowan was equally envious, but he was not one to betray it. "A very bad example," he commented, testily. "An excellent pilot, doubtless, but reckless. His take-off, for instance. He zoomed too long. I want to warn you against such a mistake."

The ferry pilot, Smoot, decided to take a chance. "The example seems good enough, and if that fel-

low's flying is a mistake, I'm sure Brigade would like to see a lot more mistakes like him."

"The commander of this squadron will answer to Brigade for the conduct of this group, Lieutenant Smoot," Major Cowan retorted with such acidity that the poor ferryman decided it was time to join his own group and head for the base. But before taking his departure he relieved his mind in the presence of Yancey, Siddons and Hampden, who had drawn away from Cowan through a desire to watch the flying rather than listen to his lectures on the art of flying.

"If you had a flyer like that one up there for a C. O.," Smoot said to them, "you'd get somewhere in this little old war. But as it is, you have my sympathy. Well, toodle-oo, *mes enfants.* Be careful with those Spads. They were built for flyers."

"You be careful that you don't fall out of that motor cycle side car on the way back," Yancey retorted. "They look like baby carriages, but they're not."

As Smoot walked away, stung by this last retort, Yancey turned to Hampden and Siddons. "How'd you like to have a flyer like that in this outfit?" he asked.

"He's all right," Hampden replied. "A lot of the ferry pilots are crack flyers—just a tough break in the game. It might have happened to you."

"I wasn't talkin' about *him*," Yancey replied and

pointed to McGee's plane, now banking in to a landing at the far end of the field. "I meant that bird down there."

"Oh, McGee?"

"Yes."

Hampden laughed, skeptically. "Fine chance to get a flyer like that!"

"Oh, I dunno. Some American outfit will draw him. He and that other fellow, Larkin, have asked to be repatriated."

"How do you know?"

"I was with 'em in town last night and they told me all about it. They flew up to Paris day before yesterday, and on the way back they landed at Chaumont and made a call on G. H. Q. They put their case before the Chief of Staff and asked him to use his influence. They've made out formal application. Both of them are tickled pink over the prospect. McGee said he would like to get with this squadron."

"Bully for him!" Hampden enthused. "Maybe we don't look so bad, if fellows like that are willing to throw in with us, eh, Tex?"

Siddons was coldly skeptical. "You have the weirdest imagination. Why should he want to be with us?"

"Dunno. Ask him."

"I shall," Siddons answered as he moved over toward the point where he estimated McGee's taxiing plane would come to a stop.

"Big stiff!" Yancey said under his breath. "He'll ask him, all right, and right out in meetin'. He never believes anything he hears until he has asked a thousand questions about it. What do you see in that fellow to like, Hamp?"

"He's all right, Tex. He was pretty decent to me while I was acting as Supply during that time Cowan grounded me. Came around to help me with the paper work and put in a good word for me."

"Yeah, he's always chummy with Supply and Operations—but only because he thinks he can get some favors that way. I despise him."

"Oh, come now! You mustn't feel that way. We are all in the same boat, and we'd as well be chummy."

"Huh! If you ever get in the same boat with that fellow he will do the steerin' while you do the rowin'. He gives me a pain!"

2

Two weeks later orders came down concentrating several pursuit, observation and bombing groups in the neighborhoods of Commercy and Nancy. The members of the squadrons to which McGee and Larkin had been detailed were feverish with excitement. Operations and armament officers were busy with the duties incident to making all planes ready for

combat. This could mean but one thing—Action!

Three nights after the move McGee and Larkin sat at a late dinner in one of the little cafés on the main street of the small French town. They were discussing the progress of their work and each was heatedly contending that his own group was superior in every way.

"Just come over and watch my flight do formation work," Larkin urged. "They'll open your eyes."

"Humph! You'd better open your own eyes! I have watched you. We were up in the sun this morning—five thousand feet above you—and watched you for half an hour. A fine bunch you have! We could have smothered you like a blanket. Have you ever shown them anything about looking in the sun for enemy planes?"

Larkin's face evidenced his chagrin. "Are you kidding me?"

"Not much! We kept right along above you, but in the sun. I'll admit they did good work, but oh, how blind! Boy, we're not too far back to get jumped on. There have been fights farther back from the lines than this. You know Fritz dearly loves to raid 'dromes where new squadrons are in training. Believe me, their spy system is perfect. I'd be willing to wager my right eye that they know these groups are stationed in this area, how long they have been in France, and just what types of planes we are us-

ing. They've the best spy system in the world. You know how many times they have raided green squadrons. They figure it puts the wind up a bunch of inexperienced men. So keep your eye peeled. And if you want to see something pretty, come over and watch my gang. They're ready for combat work right now—except Siddons."

Larkin looked up in surprise. "I thought you told me he knew more about the planes and about flying than any of the others."

"He does. But he can't—or won't—keep in formation. He cuts out, and goes joy-riding."

"Seems to me I remember someone else who used to do that same little stunt," Larkin said, smiling reminiscently.

McGee flushed. "Yes, I suppose I did, but not in training. I never cut formation until—"

"Until you saw something that looked like meat. Don't try to kid me, Red. You've dragged me into too many dog fights. Do you think I have forgotten the day we were out having a look-see, five of us, and spotted five Albatrosses below? Bingo! Down you went like a shot, and the rest of us had to follow to keep you from being made into mincemeat. Talk about being blind! All the time a bigger flock of Fokkers were in the sun above us and they came down like 'wolves on the fold.' Fellow, you had your little faults. Don't be too hard on Siddons."

"Cutting formation to get in a fight and cutting to go joy-riding are two different things. If it were anyone else but Siddons I'd ask Cowan to ground him."

"You like him?"

"Emphatically, NO! And he knows it. That's why I hesitate to make an example of him. He would think that I was satisfying a grudge. Besides, he has some sort of a drag with someone. Cowan thinks he is a great flyer. He is, too. Knows more about both the technical and practical side of the game than any of the others. That's what's wrong with him. He is so self-satisfied, so arrogant, and so cocksure of every word he utters and every movement he makes. He is the coldest fish I ever met. He reminds me of someone—but I can't remember who it is. Sometimes I think he is—Listen! What's that?"

McGee's question went unanswered as the shrill blasts of the air raid siren shattered the peace of the village with its frenzied warning. It moaned, deep-throated, then became panic-stricken and wailed tremulously in the higher registers. It was a warning to all to seek the comparative safety of the *abris* which the town had constructed against just such an emergency.

The café emptied quickly, but even the quickest followed on the heels of McGee and Larkin who, once outside, ran briskly down the street toward the house where they were billeted. They halted at the drive

entrance to gaze upward as great searchlights began playing upon the dark inverted bowl of the heavens. The long, shifting beams of light were accusing fingers seeking to point out the unwelcome, stealthy nocturnal sky prowlers.

"Listen!" McGee gripped Larkin's arm.

Sure enough, from the east, and high above, came the sound of German motors, a sound unmistakable by anyone who had once heard their unsynchronized drone. It rose and fell, rose and fell, like the hurried snoring of a giant made restless by nightmare. The sound was drawing nearer. Doubtless it had been heard by the soldiers manning the searchlights for the beams now swept restlessly across the eastern sky. To the eastward, two or three kilometers, an anti-aircraft battery opened fire, and from aloft came the dull *pouf!* of the exploding shells. Vain, futile effort! It was only the angry thundering of admitted helplessness. One chance in a million! The motors droned on, coming nearer and nearer. Excited townspeople, in wooden sabots, clattered down the streets seeking shelter; fear-stricken mothers and fathers spoke sharply to their little broods as they hustled them along.

"Buzz," Red said, "it's dollars to doughnuts they're coming here to lay some eggs on our 'drome—just to put the wind up these boys. Remember what I told you a few minutes ago."

Larkin was more hopeful. "I guess not," he said. "Headed for some supply base or ammunition dump farther in, would be my guess. But if they are coming here, there's little we can do about it. It's up to the anti-aircraft boys."

"Hum-m," McGee mused. "I wonder."

A motor cycle, with side car, running without lights, came popping down the street. Without hesitation McGee ran out into the middle of the street, waving his arms and shouting wildly. The motor cycle swerved sharply, missed the dancing, gesticulating figure and skidded to a stop.

"Say, what's eatin' you, soldier?" demanded the irate American motor cycle orderly.

For answer McGee sprang into the side car and barked a few crisp, sharp orders that brooked no hesitation. The responsive little motor roared its staccato eagerness as the machine lurched forward, leaving Larkin speechless and wondering.

"What do you know about that?" he mused. "Now what can that little shrimp be up—" he hesitated, struck by the same thought, he felt sure, that had plunged McGee into such sudden action. Then he began shouting for the driver of their motor car.

"Martins! Martins! Oh, Martins!" Blast the fellow, doubtless he was already in some place of security. "Martins! Oh, Martins!"

A door flew open, letting out a beam of light as

Martins came out, clad only in his underclothes and yawning prodigiously.

"Did you call, sir?" he asked, blinking foolishly as he studied the flashing rays of the sky-searching lights.

"Yes! Get the car! Snappy, now!"

"Yes, sir. Just as soon as I can get on some clothes."

"Hang the clothes! Get the car—and set the road afire between here and the 'drome. Move! Don't stand there blinking like a blooming owl."

Martins sped around the house, a white-clad figure racing bare-footed for the car and muttering under his breath every time his flying feet struck bits of gravel and sharp stones. The sound of the airplane motors was now much nearer; the siren was still screaming its fright; anti-aircraft guns were futilely belching steel into the air, and the searchlights were getting jumpy in their haste to locate the intruders and hold them in a beam of light.

3

Martins, with Larkin seated at his side, hurled the car through the narrow streets and out to the air-drome with a daring recklessness known only to war-trained chauffeurs who could push a car faster without lights than most people would care to ride in

broad daylight. But their speed was slow compared to that made by the surprised motor cycle orderly who had thundered off with McGee, and when Larkin sprang from the car as it screeched to a stop at the edge of the 'drome his ear caught the sound of a Clerget motor pounding under an advanced throttle as it lifted a plane from the ground at the far end of the dark field. An excited, buzzing group of pilots and mechanics were huddled together on the tarmac near the circus tent that served as a hangar, and still more men were emerging hastily from the hump-backed, black steel elephants that served them as quarters.

Larkin ran toward the group near the hangar entrance.

"Where's McGee?" he shouted, knowing the answer but hoping for some word that would give the lie to what his ears told him. He knew that the plane which had now swung back over the field and was roaring directly above as it battled for altitude was none other than McGee's balky little Camel. But no one answered him; they merely stared, as men who have just witnessed a feat of daring too noble for words, or as girls who face an impending tragedy and are too horror-stricken for action.

"Where's McGee?" Larkin shouted again. "Don't stand there like a bunch of yaps! You'll be getting a setting of high explosive eggs here in a minute.

Don't you hear that siren? Those Boche planes? Where's McGee, I asked you?"

Yancey stepped from the group and pointed up.

"I reckon that's him up yonder," he said in the slow drawl that was doubly maddening at such a moment. "He blew in here a few minutes ago like a Texas Panhandle twister, ordered the greaseballs to roll his plane on the line, and was off before she was good and warm. I reckon—"

Larkin did not wait to learn what Yancey reckoned. He dashed toward the hangar, shouting orders as he ran.

Major Cowan stepped from the hangar, barring the way. "Just a minute, Lieutenant! What is it you want?"

"What do I want? I want a plane on the line—quick!"

"No! Lieutenant McGee took off before we knew what it was all about. It is madness. You can't have—"

He stopped speaking to listen. From high above, and a little to the east, came the throbbing sound of German motors that in a few more seconds would be over the airdrome. Indeed, they might be circling now, getting their bearing and making sure of location. At that moment one of the large motor mounted searchlights near the hangar began combing the sky.

"Go tell those saps to cut that light!" Larkin

shouted, hoping that the Major would be stampeded into action that would provide the slenderest chance for him to get the mechanics to roll a Spad to the line before Cowan could know what was happening. "Better cut it! If the others can't find 'em, this one can't. It will only serve as a path of light for one of those babies up there to slide down and leave you some presents you don't want."

Major Cowan was not one to go legging it about on errands. Besides, searchlights were provided for just such uses. Then too, he rather suspected Larkin's motives, and Larkin realized this.

"Please let me have one of those Spads, Major," he pleaded. "Can't you understand—McGee and I are buddies. With two of us up there we might turn 'em back."

"No! It is too hazardous. This squadron is still in training. We are not trained as night flyers, and certainly are not prepared to give combat to a flight of bombers."

Larkin's anger smashed through his long training. All rank faded from his mind.

"Not trained, eh? Major Cowan, that freckle-faced kid up there is a night flying fool—and I'm his twin brother. Get out of my way. Oh, greaseballs! Hey, you Ack Emmas! Roll out one of those Spads and—"

"Lieutenant!" Cowan barked. "You forget your-

self. If you want to do night fighting go over to your own group and use your own plane! You forget yourself. I am still in command here!"

From aloft came the momentary stutter of two machine guns. Ah! McGee testing and warming his guns as he climbed. Oh, the fool! The precious, daring fool!

Larkin sat down on the tarmac, *ker plunk!* Let 'em raid. What mattered it? He rather hoped one of them would be accurate enough to plant a bomb on the top of Cowan's head.

"Yes, you are in command," he said, rather limply, "but why didn't you stop McGee? And since you are in command, in Heaven's name tell that light crew to cut that light. It would be just their fool, blundering luck to spot McGee and hold him for the Archies."

CHAPTER IV

Victory

1

McGee, holding up the nose of his Camel at an angle that gave the motor every ounce it would stand, was thinking the same alarming thought that had just run through Larkin's mind. It would be just his luck to be spotted by the searchlight crew and held in its beam. If so, would they recognize him? Would they see the ringed cockades on his wings, or would eager anti-aircraft gunners start blazing away? Even if they recognized the plane, his whole plan would be knocked into a cocked hat should that tell-tale streamer of light point him out to the enemy planes above who must now be looking sharp. Darkness was both his ally and his foe.

McGee was too experienced to have any mistaken notions about the hazard of his endeavor. He knew what he was up against. In the first place, any bombing plane was a formidable foe, and he could not know how many were coming on this mission. All bombers were heavily armed, and had the advantage of having at least one man free to repel at-

tack with twin machine guns. Many of the heavier German bombing planes carried crews of four or five men, though these were used in attack on highly important bases and would hardly be sent on a mission of this nature. Such machines were quite slow and not capable of being manoeuvered quickly, but their very size added to their invulnerability and their heavy armament made them a thing to be avoided by any single fighter mounted in a pursuit plane. Many pursuit pilots had learned the bitter lesson attached to a thoughtless, poorly planned attack upon a bomber or two-seater observation bus. They looked like an appetizing meal—but one must have a strong stomach if he finishes the feast.

McGee knew, also, that the oncoming raiders might be pursuit planes converted into bombers by the simple expedient of attaching bomb releases carrying lighter pellets of destruction which could be released by the pilot. This was not an unusual procedure, especially when the success of the venture might hinge upon speed. Such planes could strike swiftly, more easily avoid Archie fire, and having struck their blow could outdistance any antagonist with the nerve to storm through the night sky in pursuit.

So, as McGee climbed he realized that he was facing the unknown. The prospect of a raid had been his challenge; the size and strength of his enemy was unknown. So be it, he thought, and warmed his guns

with a short burst as he continued climbing. Their quick chatter served to reassure him and for the moment he quite forgot how useless they would be should he chance to go crashing into one of the bombers. He felt that all would be well if only those saps on the ground would cut that searchlight. Didn't they know that it would simply serve as a guide to the plane whose mission it would be to dive at the field and release ground flares to mark the target for the bombers? Of course they wouldn't think of that. Green! And with a lot to learn.

Two or three times the beam of light flashed perilously near him, and once his plane was near enough to the edge of the beam for the glass on his instrument board to reflect the rays. Then, a moment later, the glaring one-eyed monster dimmed, glowed red, and darkness leaped in from all sides. But only for a moment. Other lights, from more distant points, were still combing the sky. These concerned Red not so much as the one near the hangar. Strangely, as is the way with men at war, he cared not so much what wrath might be called down on other places if only his own nest remained unviolated. Indeed, he found himself entertaining the hope that the raiders might become confused and drop their trophies in somebody else's back yard.

Then, as suddenly as a magician produces an object out of the thin air, one of the distant search-

lights fixed upon one of the enemy planes. It was a single seater, McGee noted, and though somewhat southeast of the position he had expected, it was already pointing its nose down on a long dive that would undoubtedly carry it to a good position over the 'drome for dropping flares.

McGee knew the tactics. This was the plane whose job it was to spot the target for the bombers and then zoom away. Then the vultures would come droning over the illuminated field and drop their eggs.

Red kicked his left rudder and came around on a sharp climbing bank. By skill, or by luck, the light crew still held their beam on the black-crossed plane and in a twinkling two other lights were centered on it.

McGee made a quick estimate of distance and of the other's flying speed. Then he nosed over, slightly, on a full throttle, and drove along a line which he thought would intersect the dive of the enemy. He could hardly hope to get him in the ring sights; it was a matter of pointing the plane in what he thought was the correct line of fire and let drive with both guns.

The wind was beginning to scream and tear at the struts of the hard-pushed Camel. Speed was everything now. If that diving German plane once dropped its flares, the others, somewhere in the darkness above, would sow destruction on the field.

The distance was yet too great for anything like effective fire, but McGee decided to take a chance. After all, the whole thing was chance. He had one chance in a thousand to thwart their plans, very slim chances for bagging one of them, and some excellent chances to get bagged!

"Very well," he found himself saying in answer to these swift thoughts. "Carry on!"

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat! Both his guns began their scolding chatter. Too far to the right—and below. He ruddered left and pulled her nose up a trifle. There! Again the guns spewed out their vengeful chorus.

At this second burst the German plane seemed to yaw off, then righted itself, leveled off and flew straight at McGee.

Red felt a momentary elation that the enemy had at least been made conscious of the attack and was, for the moment, forced to abandon his objective. Two beams of light still held him mercilessly. Doubtless they served to blind him and this advantaged McGee who, unseen in the darkness, kept his Vickers going. Some of the bullets must have gone home for the German swerved suddenly and began a series of acrobatics in an effort to escape the lights. But disturbed as he was, he evidently kept his mission in mind for he continued to lose altitude and thus draw nearer the field where he could drop his flares.

McGee decided to nose over and then zoom up under his belly—by far the most vulnerable point of attack but one in which the moment of fire is brief indeed, for Camels will not long hang by their "props."

Just as McGee dived the enemy swerved quickly and also began a dive. His diving angle was sharp; his speed tremendous. Doubtless he had determined to carry out his mission and get away from an exceedingly hot spot as quickly as possible. By the fortunes of war his diving angle cut directly across McGee's path. Close—almost too close! A brief burst spat from McGee's Vickers in that heart-chilling moment when collision seemed inevitable, but McGee pulled sharply back on his stick and zoomed. Whew! It was no cinch, this fighting a light-blinded enemy.

McGee glanced back. The lights had lost the plane as suddenly as they had found it. Night had swallowed it. Now there was an unseen enemy that might—

Ah! McGee sucked in his breath sharply. A tiny tongue of flame was shooting through the sky. For a second it was little more than the flame of a match, but in a few seconds it developed into greedy, licking flames that turned the German plane into a flaming rocket. The pilot, manfully seeking escape from such a death, began side slipping in a vain effort to create an upward draft that would keep the flames

from incinerating him in his seat. For the briefest moment he did a first class job of it, and McGee, who a minute before had been hungry for victory, felt first a wave of admiration for a skillful job of flying and next a surge of pity that it must be of no avail. Even now the plane was wobbling out of control . . . then it nosed over and plunged earthward, a flaming meteor.

Fascinated, McGee watched the plunge, climbing a little as he circled. He was three times an ace with two for good measure, seventeen victories in the air, but this was his first night flamer. It was far more spectacular than he could have imagined . . . and somehow a little more unnerving. A moment ago that doomed creature had been a man courageous enough to undertake any hazard his country demanded. Enemy or no, he was a man of courage and in his own country was a patriot.

McGee felt very weak, and not at all elated. After all, he knew there were no national boundaries to valor or patriotism, and however sweet the victory it must always carry the wormwood of regret that the vanquished will see no more red dawnings and go out on no more dawn patrols. That plunging, flaming plane was as a lighted match dropped into a deep well—the deep well of oblivion.

The plane struck the earth some three or four hundred yards to the west of the 'drome. The flames,

leaping afresh, lighted up the entire vicinity. McGee, looking down, could see the dim outline of the hangar tent and the running figures that were racing toward the burning plane. He smiled, rather grimly, and his eyes searched the heavens above him. The vultures had their target now!

At that moment one of the restless searchlights singled out one of the bombers, high above him, and two other streams of light leaped to the same spot. Another plane was caught in the beam. The anti-aircraft now had their target, and they lost no time. There came two or three of the sharp barks so characteristic of anti-aircraft guns, and coincident with the sound the bursting shells bloomed into great white roses perilously near the leading plane. It rocked, noticeably, and shifted its course. Then, seemingly, all the Archies in the countryside, within range and out of range, began filling that section of the sky with magically appearing roses that in their blooming sent steel balls and flying fragments searching the sky.

The upper air was quickly converted into an inferno of bursting shells and whining missiles of jagged steel. The enemy bombers, due to the delay caused by McGee's unexpected attack upon the plane whose mission it had been to drop the ground flares, had now worked themselves into a rather awkward formation and were faced with the responsibility of making instant decision whether they should now re-

lease their bombs in a somewhat hit or miss fashion or run for it and individually select some other spot for depositing their T. N. T. hate as they made their way homeward.

The embarrassment of their position was but little greater than that of McGee's. The burning plane offered sufficient light for landing, but it was also lighting up the hangars and the field, and he momentarily expected the enemy to let go with their bombs. It would not be pleasant down there when those whistling messengers began to arrive. His present position was equally unhealthy, even though he had considerably reduced his altitude. Any minute—yes, any second—some searchlight crew might pick him up, and there is never any telling what an excited anti-aircraft battery crew might do.

McGee made the decision which is always reached by an airman who finds himself in unhealthy surroundings: he would simply high-tail it away from there until "the shouting and the tumult" subsided. He swung into the dark sky to the north and then dived down until he felt that any less altitude would be extremely likely to bring him afoul of some church steeple or factory smokestack.

One of the German pilots decided to take a chance and release his bombs. Their reverberating detonations were terrifying enough, but aside from the ugly holes they made in the open field, some five hundred

yards away from the 'drome, they accomplished nothing in the balance of warfare. The other planes, finding the welcome a bit too warm, took up a zig-zag course toward the Fatherland, but in a general course that would take them back over Nancy, where they could find a larger target for their bombs.

McGee, looking back, could see the searchlights sweeping eastward in their efforts to keep the fleeing planes spotted. But their luck had already been great indeed, and now they were again feverishly searching the black and seemingly empty sky.

"Good time to tool this baby home," McGee thought as he swung around and headed for the 'drome, its location still well marked for him by the flickering flames of the fallen ship.

"Poor old Nancy!" he said aloud as he realized that the thwarted bombers would likely spew out their hate on that sorely tried city. "I'm sorry to wish this off on you, but you are used to it and these lads are not. Talk about luck! I wonder what good angel is perched on my shoulder."

Back over the 'drome he signaled with his Very light pistol for landing lights, his take-off having been too sudden to permit of thinking of ground flares. He circled the field, waiting for the lights. No response. He signaled again. Still no response.

"Too much excitement, I guess," he mused. Then he flew low over the remains of the burning plane,

around which had gathered a large group—large enough, McGee thought, to include every man of the squadron from the C. O. down to the lowliest grease-ball.

"Humph! A fine target you'd make!" Red snorted, and felt like throwing his Very pistol into the group. "Well, here goes! I've made darker landings than this. And if I crack up—" he smiled as a grim Irish bull flashed through his mind—"it will be a good lesson to the ground crew. Nothing like Irish humor at a time like this."

2

If one who stands less than five feet six and is freckled of face and red of hair can command hauteur and dignity, then it can be said that a few minutes later McGee, with hauteur and dignity, strode into the excited, gabbling group that surrounded the burning German plane. For a moment none of them recognized him. With hands on hips, arms akimbo, he stood watching them. He was still just a little too mad to trust his tongue.

Major Cowan was the first to notice him. "Ah! Lieutenant McGee! I am—"

"No sir, I am Lieutenant McGee's ghost. McGee got his neck broken over there just now—trying to make a landing in the dark. Your ground crew were

exceedingly helpful to him, Major. So nice of them to obey his signals so promptly."

For once Cowan was at a disadvantage. "Gad, man! Did you signal?"

"Oh, yes. I waved my hand. Rather original idea, don't you think? Perhaps you weren't expecting me to come back."

"Frankly, Lieutenant, I wasn't." The look on Cowan's face was one of genuine admiration. "You have done a courageous thing, Lieutenant—and I thought it foolhardy. I said as much to Lieutenant Larkin, and I apologize to you, here, in the presence of all these men who witnessed your courage."

All the others thereupon surged around McGee, pumping his hand vigorously and clapping him on the back.

McGee's anger faded. It was a thing that never stayed long with him.

"Is Larkin here?" he asked.

"He was," Cowan answered. "Came a few minutes after you took off, but when I refused him a ship he got mad as a hornet, bawled out the light crew and—and me, and then jumped back in his car and rode off. Rather tempestuous fellow."

"If he had stayed here," McGee said, regretfully, "my Camel wouldn't now be standing over yonder on its nose with its undercarriage wiped off. He'd at least think of landing lights." He pushed his way

through the crowd toward the burning embers of the twisted, broken and charred plane. "Pilot burned to a crisp, I suppose," he mused half aloud.

Hampden, who was standing nearest, answered:

"No, the poor devil jumped. Landed over there by the road. They carried him over to the hospital tent. Not a—a whole bone in his body." His voice seemed choked. "It's a—a fearful way to go."

"A sporting way, I would say," Siddons spoke up. "Even in the last moment he rather cheated you, McGee. He escaped the flames, anyhow."

McGee looked at Siddons searchingly. In those cold grey eyes and in the half-taunting smile there was none of the sympathy or natural, normal emotion that had so choked Hampden's voice.

"He did not cheat me, Lieutenant Siddons," McGee said, his voice edged by his dislike of the man. "I am only one of the small factors in this unfortunate game. Duty may be pursued without wanting to see others suffer. He was a brave man. I salute him." He turned to Cowan. "Major Cowan, if your crew had attempted to extinguish these flames we might have added a great deal to our knowledge of the progress the enemy is making. I could not recognize this plane in the air. I think it is a new type."

"By Jove! I never thought of it."

McGee turned away to conceal an expression which

he could not control, and as he did so he heard Yancey growl to Hampden:

"What a first-rate kitchen police in a Home Guard outfit that bimbo would make!"

As McGee walked back toward the hangar, Hampden and Siddons joined him. He felt Hampden give his elbow a congratulatory squeeze. Then Siddons said:

"Are you going over to have a look at your fallen adversary, Lieutenant?"

"Oh, I say, Siddons!" Hampden exclaimed, pained and surprised.

"I am going to make out my report," McGee answered, simply. "I wonder if you would like to give me a confirmation, Lieutenant Siddons?"

The question took Siddons off his feet. "Why—er—do you really want me to?"

"Not especially; I just had a feeling that you would be pleased to have your name brought in it somehow."

Several of the pilots followed McGee into the hut used for headquarters, but Siddons was not among them. Whatever his feelings, following the little instructor's pointed rebuke, he concealed them behind the cool indifference which marked all of his actions. At the door to headquarters he turned down the gravel walk that ran in front of the row of huts used as quarters and was soon lost to sight in the darkness.

3

McGee's report of his victory was characteristically laconic. Not a word did he employ that was not necessary to the report. No fuss, no feathers, no mock heroics. He had engaged an E. A. (enemy aircraft) and had sent it down in flames. Reading the report, one would find little enough to lift it out of the usual run of reports. Another meeting; another victory. No more, no less. Only in the last paragraph did he depart from his usual method of reporting. He wrote:

"My Camel carried no ground flares. Twice signaled for landing lights with no response. Circled field. Entire personnel was gathered around burning E. A. and making no effort to extinguish fire, which by this time had nearly consumed plane. Forced to land in dark. Wiped out landing gear and shattered prop.

"Recommendation: That all commands advise ground crews that a live pilot is of more importance than a dead enemy."

Having finished, he looked up at those who had followed him into headquarters. They were gathered in little groups, excitedly discussing the victory, which had actually been the first encounter they had witnessed. Fortunately, the victory had been on their side and they were considerably bucked. It seemed

dead easy. Why, one man had gone aloft, bagged a plane, thwarted the plans of the enemy and was back on the ground before you could tell about it. The war was looking up! And this instructor was no slouch. What this squadron wouldn't do to the enemy when an over-cautious Chief of Air Service said "Let's go!"

Hearing their comments, McGee smiled. He knew, better than they, the great element of luck in his victory.

The enemy, whose aim it had been to thoroughly frighten and subdue this green squadron, had succeeded instead in greatly increasing their confidence in themselves. The enemy had come to sow destruction; they had actually planted a seed that sprang instantly from the ground, bearing the bold and sturdy flower of self-confidence. Old dogs of war had been unleashed, and now a new pack was yelping on the trail.

"Where is Major Cowan?" McGee asked.

"Over at the hospital tent," someone answered.

"Oh, I see. Perhaps it's just as well. He might not care to sign a confirmation after reading my recommendation. Which one of you will give me a confirmation?"

As one man they surged forward.

"Just a minute!" Red laughed. "I said *which* one. On second thought I guess I'd better leave that

to the C. O. First victory from his squadron, you know."

"His squadron nothing!" Yancey growled. "You don't belong to us—yet."

"No, but I'm here by assignment; I wouldn't want to hurt anyone's feelings." He chuckled. "I'm afraid, though, that the last paragraph in this report has a sort of stinger in it."

"Let's see it," Hampden urged.

McGee handed him the report. Hampden read it, whistled softly and passed it to Yancey, who read quite as slowly as he talked. A look of disappointment spread over his face.

"It's a report, I reckon," he said slowly, "but it's about as satisfyin' as a mess of potato chips would be to a hungry cowhand. It's as thin as skimmed milk. Say, who won this fight? You or the other fellow?"

"I believe that report will give me the credit," McGee answered.

"Maybe. And that last paragraph will win somebody a bawlin' out. Cowan will ask you to change that. Looks like inefficiency on somebody's part."

"Perhaps it is. It goes as it stands. After all, it goes through channels to the Royal Flying Corps, you know. I'm flying their ship and still under their orders."

"Well, when I get my first one," Yancey replied,

"believe me, they'll get the full details, and when they get through readin' it they'll think I'm the bimbo what invented flyin'. Those white-collared babies at Headquarters have to get all their thrills secondhand, and this thing of yours is about as thrillin' as the minutes of a Sunday School Meeting."

At that moment Mullins, the peppery little Operations Officer, entered the room, his face a mass of wrinkling smiles. He walked over to the desk where McGee was seated and from his pockets dumped out a double handful of articles, such as army men had learned to list under the broad heading—"Souvenirs." There was a wrist watch, a German automatic pistol, a silver match box, a leather cigarette case, a belt buckle bearing the famous "Gott Mit Uns" and a number of German paper marks.

For a moment McGee sat staring at them, then slowly pushed his chair back from the table as he looked up at the smiling Mullins.

"What's this—stuff?" he asked.

"Souvenirs, of course! From your latest victory. Cowan and I decided to go over to the hospital and run through the chap's pockets to see if we could find anything that should be sent back to Intelligence. Darned if Siddons wasn't there ahead of us, getting ready to fill his pockets with *your* souvenirs. I told him to wait until he bagged his own game. So there you are—cups, belts and badges!"

McGee gathered up the articles, one by one, and handed them back to Mullins.

"Take them back," he ordered, somewhat firmly.

"What!" Mullins' jaw dropped. "You don't want 'em?"

"No."

"Not even *one*—for luck?"

"No. I've never carried anything that belonged to the *other* fellow, for luck. Take them back."

Yancey stepped forward, but he was still behind the soft-voiced Edouard Fouche, who said:

"I'll take them, then. I'm not so high-minded about it."

Tex Yancey pawed Fouche aside as a bear might sweep aside an annoying puppy. "Out of the way, little fellow. We'll divide these spoils of war—or we'll draw for 'em. Everyone to draw straws."

"Wait!" McGee interposed himself between Mullins, Yancey, and the indignant Fouche. "If you boys want souvenirs, go out and get them for yourself. Mullins told Siddons to wait until he bagged his own game. That goes here, too. Take 'em back, Mullins. A man of courage has a right to his personal belongings—even after he is dead. Take them back and let them be buried with him. By the way," he turned back to the desk and picked up his report, "I want a confirmation from Major Cowan. Where is he?"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," Mullins replied. "He just jumped in a side car and went streaking off to Wing, looking like he thought the war had been won. And he took with him a nice little plum for Intelligence. We found an order in that pilot's pocket that should have been left behind."

"Indeed? What was it?" McGee asked.

"It was in German, of course," Mullins continued, "and Cowan is as rotten in German as I am. But Siddons is a shark at it. Speaks half a dozen languages, you know, and—"

"No, I didn't know," McGee answered, cryptically.

"Yeah, reads it like English. That order was to the effect that their high command had received information that several air units were located in this sector, and ours, in particular, was placed to a T. It was an order for a bombing group to come over and give us an initiation. 'Highly important! Highly important!' Cowan said, and busted off for Wing. To watch him you'd think he had brought down the plane. It's strange, though, how those square-heads find out every move that is made on this side of the line."

"They have a wonderful spy system," McGee said. "We learned that well enough up on the English front, where we had reason to feel sure of the loyalty of every soldier. But the leaks get through.

Cowan was right, the order was highly important. The Intelligence Department do some clever work with the bits of information gathered from first one place and another. It's somewhat like piecing an old-fashioned pattern quilt. A piece here, a piece there, all seemingly unrelated but in the end presenting a distinct pattern. Yes, it's important, I dare say."

Mullins sighed, heavily. "Well then, I suppose Cowan will come back here with a chest on him like a Brigadier!"

Yancey laughed, picked up McGee's report and handed it to Mullins. "Read that—especially the last paragraph. When Cowan reads that I can see his chest droppin' like a toy balloon that meets up with a pin. I sure want to be hangin' around when it is presented to him. This war has its compensations. Boys, make yourselves comfortable and await the comin' of the mighty. It's worth stayin' up all night to see."

CHAPTER V

Orders for the Front

1

McGee's victory had a most salutary effect upon the personnel of the squadron. They lost sight of the fact that he had been highly favored by luck in the encounter and that but for luck, coupled with skill, the balance might well have been in the enemy's favor. They began to look upon victory as a luscious fruit that would always be served to their table—defeats were the bitterberries that the enemy must eat.

This attitude was greatly strengthened by another fortunate victory of a squadron stationed at Toul. This squadron, while it boasted some splendid flyers, was quite green and had much to learn. But, despite this, they too had been victors in their first encounter with the enemy, and in a manner quite as dramatic as had been McGee's victory. And it was more widely heralded because the victor was wearing an American uniform and the victory could be properly called the first score for the Americans. It came about in this fashion:

A Spring day dawned, cold and foggy, and three members of the squadron at Toul had gone on patrol. Their ardor was soon dampened by the chill fog and they returned to their base. Shortly after their return the alert was sounded and the report came that German planes were coming over, concealed by the ceiling of fog. In a few moments their motors could be heard above the town. That minute two Americans left the ground, climbing rapidly toward the ceiling of fog. Just as they neared it, two German planes came nosing down. They were barely clear of the blinding fog cloud when they were attacked by the American pilots. So swift was the attack, and so accurate the fire, that both German planes were forced down and the two American pilots were back on the ground in less than five minutes from the time of their take-off.

Luck? Yes, Luck and Skill—the two things that must walk hand in hand with every war pilot. But there was no one to be found in all of Toul who even hinted of luck. Had not the fight taken place in full view of the townspeople? Had they not witnessed the daring and skill of these Americans? Luck? Ask the citizens of Toul. Ah, *mais non, Messieurs!* they would tell you. The German planes dived—so. Whosh! Out of the cloud they came. And there were those precious Americans, waiting for them—and in just the right place. Is not that skill, Mon-

sieur? Then, *taka-taka-taka-taka* went their guns. Only a minute so. *Voila!* The Boche are both out of control. Ah, that is not luck, Monsieur.

All along the front American squadrons accepted the verdict as evidence of superior flying ability, but McGee and Larkin, with the knowledge bought by bitter experience, knew that perhaps in the very next encounter the balance would be in favor of the other fellow. They knew, too, that over-confidence is an ally singing a siren song. They worked hard to dispel this over-confidence that had laid hold of the group, but their words of warning fell on deaf ears.

This spirit of eager confidence was not peculiar to the air groups near the front; it was a part of the entire American Expeditionary Force. Where was this bloomin' war that seemed so difficult to win? asked the American doughboy. Bring it on! Trot it out! Let's get it over and get out of this *Parlez vous* land. Just give them a crack at Fritz! Say! In no time at all they'd have Old Bill himself trussed up in chains and carried back to the little old U. S. A., and exhibited around the country at two-bits a peek. Guess that wouldn't be a nifty way to help pay for the war! And as for the Crown Prince—well, over a hundred thousand American doughboys had promised to bring his ears back to a hundred thousand sweethearts—just a little souvenir to show what an American could do when he got going.

2

This same boastful confidence was present among the pilots with whom McGee and Larkin were daily associated, but fortunately it was somewhat counterbalanced by the long-delayed orders sending the squadron to the front. April slipped away and May came. Still no orders. It was maddening! Yancey, Fouche, Hampden, Hank Porter, Rodd—in fact all members of the command, save Siddons, fretted and fumed and voiced their opinions of a stupid G. H. Q., that failed to appreciate just what a whale of a squadron this was.

Siddons accepted the delay in the same cool, indifferent manner with which he met all the vexations of the army. It was as water on a duck's back; he seemed not to care a hoot whether he ever engaged an enemy. Then in May, with alarming suddenness and force, the German Crown Prince began his great drive at Paris. His ears, it seemed, were yet intact, and those Americans who had so earnestly hoped to get them were soon to discover that the possessor thereof was all too safely ensconced behind an advancing horde of German infantrymen who were driving forward in a relentless, unhalting advance that struck terror to the very heart of war-weary France. In three days the enemy forces swept from the Aisne southward across the Vesle and the Ourcq. Their

most advanced position came to rest on the Marne.

For the second time the German army was on the banks of the Marne. "Papa" Joffre had hurled them back from this river in the first year of the war; now Marshal Foch must do as well—or France was doomed.

But Foch was handicapped. He had an army bled white by four years of dreadful warfare. The French soldiers, no less valiant than when the war began, found themselves too weak in numbers to stem the tide of an advance conducted by an ambition crazed Crown Prince determined to reach Paris regardless of the cost to him in human sacrifice.

Sullenly the French fell back, fighting like demons, contesting every inch of the way, but none the less retreating. In this hour of peril France turned her eyes upon the newly arrived and partially trained Americans, and in those eyes, now almost hopeless, was a look of mute, desperate appeal. It must be now or never!

All the roads leading back from the front were choked with refugees too weary, too heartbroken, too barren of hope to do anything but hurry their children before them and strain at their hand drawn, heavy carts piled high with the household belongings which they hoped to save. Old men, old women, the lame, the halt, the blind; dogs, cats, goats, with here and there a dogcart, all struggling to the rear.

Many came empty-handed, facing they knew not what, and looking with pity upon the French troops who were moving forward to battle the enemy unto death.

"Ah," said the refugees, shrugging their shoulders, "*finis la guerre!* These poor Poilus of ours, they cannot stop the Boche. They are too tired, too worn with war. If only we had new blood. If only the Americans would come now. But no, perhaps it is now too late."

Behind them, all too close, rumbled and roared the angry guns—guns of the enemy furrowing fields and leveling houses and villages; guns of the French in savage defiance protesting every inch of advance and holding on with a rapidly failing strength. Help must come now, quickly.

And help came. Two American divisions, ready for action, were summoned by Foch to move forward with all possible speed. The 2nd Division came hurrying from their rest billets near Chaumont-en-Vexin, northwest of Paris; the 3rd Division came thundering by train and camion from Chateau-Villain, southeast of Paris. Two converging lines of fresh, eager warriors came marching, marching, the light of battle in their eyes and with rollicking, boisterous songs on their lips. At quick rout step they came. This was no parade; this was a new giant coming up to test its strength. And all up and

down the brown columns the giant was singing as it came . . . .

"Mademoiselle from Armentieres,
Parlez vous,
Mademoiselle from Armentieres,
Parlez vous,
Mademoiselle from Armentieres
Hasn't been kissed for forty years,
Hinkey Dinkey *Parlez vous!*"

Slush, slog! Slush, slog! went the heavy hobnailed shoes slithering through the mud and water of the roads. Mile after mile, hour after hour. At the end of each weary hour a short rest, an easing of the shoulders from the cutting pack straps. Ten minutes only did they rest. Then down the long columns rang the sharp commands, "Fall in. Fall in! . . . Com-pan-ee . . . Atten-shun! Forward, March!" A few minutes in cadenced marching and then the command, "Rout step—March!" Again the confident, boisterous giant took up its song:

"Good-bye Ma, good-bye Pa,
Good-bye mule with your old he-haw.
I may not know what the war's about
But I bet by Gosh I soon find out!
O, my sweetheart, don't you fear,
I'll bring you a king for a souvenir.
I'll bring you a Turk, and the Kaiser too,
And that's about all one feller can do."

Marching, singing, jesting, they pressed on until their advance guard met the plodding, cheerless, downcast refugees. The French peasants halted in their tracks, staring, unable to believe their eyes. Here, in the flesh, by thousands upon thousands, was the answer to their prayers. Perhaps it was not too late, after all. Here was new strength, new courage.

Old men danced with joy, embracing their wives and children, embracing one another, and tears of joy coursed down their wan, lined faces.

"*Les Americains!*" they shouted. "*Vive l'Amerique! Nous sauveurs sont arrivee!*" (The Americans! Long live America! Our saviors have arrived.)

The cry spread; it ran up and down the roads and bypaths; it became a magic sentence restoring courage throughout all France.

As for the resolute Americans, they merely plodded on, questioning one another as to what all the shouting was about. Oh, so that was it? Sure they were here, but why get excited about it? . . . The Boche is breaking through, eh? As you were, Papa, and keep your shirt on! And as for that old lady over there by that cart, crying so softly—say! somebody who can parley this language go over there and tell that old lady not to cry any more. Tell her we'll fix it up, toot sweet. O-o-o! La, la! Pipe the pretty mademoiselle over there driving that dogcart. Ain't she the pippin though! Say—

"Fall in! Fall in! . . . Com-pan-ee, At-ten-shun! Forward, March!"

"Mademoiselle from Armentieres,
Parlez vous.
Mademoiselle from Armentieres. . .

A new giant was going in, a giant that did not yet know its own strength, a somewhat clownish giant, singing as it came.

3

Those three days of the Crown Prince's drive on the Marne were dark days for France. The French people listened eagerly for word from the front—and prayed as they had never prayed before, while every American unit, wherever billeted in France, waited impatiently for orders that would send them in for their first baptism of fire.

McGee and Larkin, though supposed to be instructors and therefore unmoved by the battle lust that had laid heavy hands on every pilot in France, found themselves itching for action. They could smell battle afar off; they knew the need of air supremacy at such a time. On the flying field, and at squadron headquarters, they tried to cheer up the depressed and sullen pilots who were chafing under the restraint of inaction. But alone, in the home of Madame Beauchamp, they freely expressed their feelings.

"I can't see why this squadron is not ordered up," McGee said to Larkin one night as they sat alone in their room. "They are better trained than we were when we hopped across the channel. Remember that day, Buzz?"

"Yes indeed! That was our big day; it's exactly the same big day these chaps are waiting for. There must be a great need of planes. I understand the German Army has crashed through to the Marne. If they pass there—" he shrugged his shoulders expressively.

They sat for a moment in silence, thinking the same gloomy thoughts that were so staggering to all the people of the allied nations.

"What if the squadron should be sent up?" Larkin asked at last. "Just where would we get off?"

McGee shook his head. "Don't know, I'm sure. It's strange how we've received no word on our applications for repatriation. I guess we are stuck for the rest of the war. Instructors! Bah! I'm developing an itch for action."

"So am I," Larkin agreed. "When we were first sent back from the front, I'll admit I was glad enough to come. I was fed up. But I'm fed up here now. And what can *we* do about it?"

"Well, for one thing I can go to bed," McGee replied yawning. "To-morrow is another day." He began unwinding one of his wrapped puttees. "Ever

notice how much longer these blasted things are when you are sleepy?" he asked.

Just as he had finished with one, and had rolled it into a neat ball, a motor cycle came popping into the yard. Buzz looked at Red inquiringly.

"Wonder what that is?" he asked.

The downstairs front door opened; heavy hobnail shoes sounded on the stairs.

"Dunno," McGee answered, looking at the puttee roll in his hand. "But I'll wager it's something that will force me to put this thing on again. I never got an order from headquarters in my life when I hadn't just finished taking off my putts."

A heavy knock on the door.

"Come in."

An orderly entered, saluted smartly, and handed McGee a folded paper. "A note from Major Cowan, sir. He said there would be no answer."

"Very well. Thank you, Rawlins. For a moment I thought it might be orders for the front."

"No chance, sir. We're the goats of the air service. The war will be over before we get a chance. I say they'd as well kept us at home where we could get real food and sleep in real beds instead of these blasted hay mows us enlisted men sleep in."

"Right you are, Rawlins. I'll speak to the Commanding General about it to-morrow. In the meantime, carry on, Rawlins."

"Yes, sir." A smart salute, a stiff about face, and he was gone. They could hear him grumbling as he went down the stairs.

McGee looked at the folded paper. On it, in Cowan's hand, was written; To Lieutenants McGee and Larkin.

"What is it?" Larkin asked, impatiently.

McGee unfolded the sheet. Scrawled across it were these electrifying words:

"Just finished talking over the phone to Wing. They inform me that orders have been received approving your application for repatriation. The order will come down in the morning. Congratulations. Cowan."

Red slapped Larkin on the back with sufficient force to start him coughing and then began tousling his hair.

"There, you old kill-joy!" he was shouting. "Now stop your worrying. What do you think of that?"

Larkin began a clownish Highland fling that eloquently spoke his thoughts. At last he came to rest, snapped his heels together, saluted smartly and said:

"Lieutenant Red McGee, U. S. A., I believe. How do you like that—you little shrimp?"

"Maybe we'll be buck privates, for all you know."

"No, same rank," Larkin answered. "But believe me, I'm free to confess now that I'd rather be a buck

in Uncle Sam's little old army than a brass hat in any other. Boy, shake!"

4

Sometime after midnight, at least an hour after sleep had at last overcome McGee's and Larkin's joyous excitement, a sleep-shattering motor cycle again came pop-popping to their door. The dispatch bearer hammered lustily on the barred front door until admitted by the sleepy-eyed, white robed, grumbling Madame Beauchamp, and then clattered up the stairs, two steps at a time. He pounded heavily on the door of the sleeping pilots.

McGee fumbled around on the table at the side of the bed, found the candle stub, and as the flaring match dispelled the shadows, called, "Come in! Don't beat the door down!"

Rawlins fairly burst into the room. "Major Cowan's compliments, sir, and he directs you to report to the squadron at once."

"Good heavens! At this hour? What's up, Rawlins?"

Rawlins smiled expansively. "Orders for the front, sir. They're taking down the hangar tents now, and trucks will be here in the next hour for baggage and equipment. All the ships are to be on the line, checked and inspected an hour before dawn.

The C. O. said to make it snappy. He said a truck would come after your luggage. It's a madhouse over at headquarters, sir."

Both pilots sprang from the bed.

"Do you know where my orderly sleeps, Rawlins?" McGee asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Go bounce him out and send him up here, *tout suite!* Tell Major Cowan we'll be over on the double quick. By the way, Rawlins, do you know where we're going?"

"No, sir. Secret orders, I understand. But I don't care a whoop just so long as it's to the front."

"Right you are. Toddle along, Rawlins. Buzz, light that other candle over there. I can't even find my shoe by this light."

An hour later, with all personal equipment packed and ready for the baggage truck, McGee and Larkin reported to Cowan, who was standing outside headquarters, issuing orders with the rapidity of a machine gun.

"All set, sir," McGee said, "and thanks for the note of congratulations. In the nick of time, wasn't it? Otherwise we would have been left behind."

"I suppose so," the Major replied. "Fact is, I don't know your status now, and I don't know how to dispose of your case. I called Wing and was told that your assignment hadn't come down. The per-

sonnel of this squadron is complete. Here's a pretty pickle! Guess I'd better pass the buck and send you back to Wing."

McGee's face fell. For once words failed him. He turned his eyes on Larkin, appealingly.

Larkin entered the breach manfully. "Major Cowan," he began, "when we made application to get back under our own flag, we did it hoping we'd go to the front—not to the rear. This sudden order comes because pilots are needed. The better trained they are, the better our chances for victory. I'm not boasting, sir, but McGee and I have been in action. We can be a help."

"Yes, yes. Of course. I'd like to have you in my squadron, well enough, but what about the red tape?"

"Wait until it catches up with us. Don't go looking for red tape to fetter us," Larkin replied.

"Humm!" Cowan mused. He knew, none better, that here before him stood two excellent pilots with a wealth of combat experience. If he sent them back, doubtless some other squadron would draw them, and that squadron commander would be the gainer, he the loser. Still, he had no authority for taking them along. An assignment order would doubtless reach them within twenty-four or forty-eight hours. Still and all, he considered, much can happen in that time—especially to an untried squadron going into action. Such pilots as these were scarce, and many

were the commanders who would seek them. "Well," he said at last, "just what would you do in my place?"

It was a fair question, and one seldom heard from the lips of a commanding officer. Coming from Cowan, it was doubly surprising, and effectively blocked all pleas founded on sentiment and sympathy.

Now Larkin was stumped, but McGee was ready to take up the gage.

"Major Cowan, I have been in the service long enough to know that the wise army man always gets out from under. Pass the buck. It's the grand old game. But I see a way out. If I were in your position I would direct the issue of an order sending us back. But," he added as Cowan evidenced surprise, "I'd manage to have that order mislaid in the excitement."

Cowan nervously paced back and forth. Suddenly he wheeled in decision. "No," he said, "I won't pass the buck; I won't shift the responsibility. Passing the buck in training may be all very well, but a commander who does so in action is not fitted for command. We are on the eve of action. Report to Lieutenant Mullins, gentlemen, and tell him I said you were to go along. See that your ships are ready at four a. m." He turned and walked rapidly toward a group of ground men who were loading a truck.

Larkin's eyes became wide with astonishment. "Well what do you know about that! Say, that bird is going to make a real C. O."

"I think he is one now," McGee answered. "Action does that to men—sometimes."

CHAPTER VI

The Squadron Takes Wing

1

Only a war pilot can visualize the confusion and excitement incident to moving a squadron base up to the front. There is work enough for all even when such a move is foreseen and planned for days in advance, but when a moving order comes down in the dead of night—as is so frequently the case—then rank is forgotten. Pilots, Commanders, Supply and Operations officers, air mechanics, flight leaders, in fact everyone, from the C. O. down to the lowliest greaseball, pitches in with a gusto sufficient to produce a miracle. For it is little short of the miraculous to carry out an order, received at midnight, calling for a movement at dawn. In fact, one inexperienced in army ways would declare that it couldn't be done. But Great Headquarters considers only what must be done, issues orders accordingly, and such is the magic of discipline and proper spirit that lo! the thing *is* done. The impossible becomes possible—and the ordinary!

And so it was with Major Cowan's squadron. The

hour they had so long awaited had come at last. So great was their zeal that with the first hint of dawn in the east the planes were all on the field, properly outfitted, finally checked, and ready to go. Even the planes seemed to be huddled together, poised like vibrant butterflies, eager to take wing.

McGee and Larkin well knew, from experience, the varied, conflicting emotions felt by the members of the squadron. Standing near the barren spot where the large hangar tent had been, they watched the various members making their last minute preparations. Occasionally they gathered in groups, all talking at once, and in hurriedly passing one another they would slap each other on the back with a force greater than needed in friendly greeting. It was the fevered reaction of nerves! They had waited for this hour, yes, and at last they were going up to the front; but every man of them knew that some of them would never come back. There was a grim gateman up there where the guns roared, waiting to take his toll.

"They think they are going right in," Larkin said to Red, as he watched a pilot by the name of Carpenter make the last of at least a dozen inspections of his two machine guns. "We haven't the foggiest notion where we are going, but I'll wager we won't see action for several days."

"I think you are wrong there," McGee replied. "There's a tremendous push up on the Marne. My

guess would be that we will go somewhere in the neighborhood of Epernay—probably to take over a sector patrolled by a French squadron so that they can be used on the more active front around Chateau-Thierry or up around Rheims. Hullo! There goes the siren and here comes the Major. We will know soon enough now."

"I'll wager you a dinner it's another soft spot—no action." Larkin said.

"Done! You are through with soft spots now."

Major Cowan's quick walk spoke volumes. The pilots shouted derisively at the sound of the siren, a distressingly noisy contrivance designed to arouse sleepy pilots and turn them out for dawn patrol.

"Fall in! Fall in!" Mullins began shouting. "You act like a bunch of sheep! Line up there!"

"Call the roll of officers," Cowan ordered.

A staff sergeant, who had kept his wits sufficiently to rescue the roll from another headquarters non-com who was packing everything in one of the trucks, came hurrying forward with the roll. The names were droned off. The "Here!" that responded to each name was a full commentary on the mental attitude of the respondent. Yancey, for instance, fairly shouted his, while Rodd hesitated, seeming to search for an even smaller word. Carpenter's "here," was little more than a whisper, as might come from one who was making an admission which

he wished circumstances had ordered otherwise. And the rotund little McWilliams answered in a manner that convinced McGee that Mac was really wishing he were not here.

McGee and Larkin, not yet carried on the roll, stood to one side, conscious of the fact that they were still wearing uniforms of the Royal Flying Corps. They felt like two lost sheep.

"Look at their faces," Red whispered to Larkin. "Faces tell a lot. They're keen to go, all right, but take Carpenter and McWilliams, for instance. Scared stiff. They're expecting to meet an entire Hun Circus between here and—and wherever we are going."

The roll call ended.

"Gentlemen," Major Cowan began, his voice crisp and business-like, "we have been ordered up to La Ferte sous Jouarre, due southwest of the Chateau-Thierry salient."

The exclamation of surprise forced him to pause. McGee gave Larkin a dig in the ribs. "I win," he said. "That's no soft spot."

"But," Major Cowan continued, "for some reason Brigade has seen fit to divide the journey into two parts. Possibly to permit our trucks to reach there ahead of us, but more probably because it lacks faith in our ability to make the change without scattering our ships all along the line of flight. For my part, I have no such fear. I think I know the ability of

this pursuit group." He hesitated, to let this sink in. And it was well that he did. Yancey gasped, and began coughing to cover it up. Hank Porter stepped on Hampden's boot with great force. Hampden in turn nudged Siddons, who alone of all the group displayed no emotion. Never before had these men heard Cowan indulge in compliment. Something had come over him. His moustache actually looked a little more like a *man's* moustache. In fact, Yancey thought, the blasted thing was almost military.

"However," Cowan continued, "we will fly to a field just south of Epernay to-day. To-morrow morning we will take off and continue a course, almost parallel with the present lines, to La Ferte sous Jouarre. Our destination has been kept confidential until this moment. From necessity, of course, I have gone over the maps and our course with the flight leaders. They know the way. In case one of them should be forced down, that flight will double up with one of the others. You have little to worry about. Keep your head and remember where you are going. If forced down, proceed to La Ferte sous Jouarre, on the Paris-Metz road, at the earliest moment. But," he added, slowly, "as I said before, I expect to see us arrive there together, and in order. That is all, gentlemen. Yonder comes the sun. To your ships now, and look sharp as you take off. Remember, this is no joy-ride. Hold your positions."

The pilots broke into a run for their ships, slapping one another on the shoulder as they ran.

"Luck, old war horse."

"Same to you, big feller."

"Hey, Yancey! If you're leading B Flight, give her the gun and high-tail it. The war's waiting!"

"S'long, Hank. Luck, feller."

"Get a waddle on, Mac. The war's lookin' up, eh?"

"I hope to spit in your mess kit."

Laughing, bantering, shouting, they climbed into their planes. The helpers stood at the wings, ready to take out the chocks when the motors had warmed; the mechanics took their places at the props. How envious they were! The little wasps that they had so carefully groomed were going forward to the battle zone, and every mechanic offered up prayer that his ship would function perfectly and make good the hope which Cowan had expressed.

A prop went over, *whish!* The first motor caught and roared. Another . . . another . . . bedlam now. No longer any shouting, only a waving of hands, a few last minute adjustments as the motors warmed and sent a mighty dust cloud whirling back to obliterate the spot where the hangar had stood.

Straight ahead, a fiery red ball rose over a slate-colored hedge. A long flight of ravens crossed directly before the rising sun. Huh! Clumsy fellows.

And slow. Better come over and take some lessons from some real birds.

Cowan's plane moved forward slowly, roared into life and fairly sprang into the fiery eye of the sun. Numbers two and three followed, skimming the dew drenched grass like swallows over a lake. Then four and five. By George, this was something like! This was worth waiting for!

The falconer of war had unhooded his new brood of hawks and they mounted up, free of bells and jesses.

2

The flight to the airdrome some six kilometers south of Epernay was made without incident. That is, it was thought to be without incident until Yancey, leading B Flight, reported to Cowan that Siddons had been forced down by some trouble over Vitry. Cowan was evidently displeased. He had hoped for a perfect score.

"What was the matter?" he demanded, the ends of his moustache twitching nervously.

"Don't know, sir. He kept droppin' back. I swung alongside but I couldn't savvy his signals. He kept pointin' back at his tail. I couldn't see anything wrong, but there's a big 'drome at Vitry and he signaled me that he was goin' down. I hung around to

watch his landin' and then hustled back to my flight."

"Fuel up, fly back there and see what's wrong," Cowan ordered. "I've a sneaky suspicion that he wasn't as bad off as he made out."

As Yancey turned toward his ship, McGee came up, smiling with pleasure over the success of the flight.

"Just a minute, Yancey!" Cowan called. "I've changed my mind. You needn't go back."

He drew McGee to one side. "Do you remember passing over the French 'drome outside of Vitry?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Your plane is in good order?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Yancey tells me that Siddons was forced down there. I want you to refuel, go back there and see what the trouble was. I have my own ideas."

"Yes?" McGee queried.

"That fellow hates formation flying like the devil hates holy water," Cowan answered. "He's a joy-rider. He knows how anxious I am to effect this move without a hitch, and he also knows there'll be no passes into Epernay to-night. I've a hunch Vitry looked good to him. I want you to find out."

"Very well, sir."

"I'm sending you," Cowan explained, smiling faintly, "because it doesn't make so much difference

if you get lost, since you are merely 'also along', and also because I don't expect you to get lost. Report to me upon your return."

"Yes, sir."

3

The mission was not particularly pleasing to McGee. Chasing around after Siddons was not his idea of a riotous time.

It was some fifty-five kilometers back to Vitry, but with a good tail wind he made it in quick time. The French major in command of the squadron stationed there was exceedingly gracious. Yes, the American had landed, he told McGee, but he had taken off again within the hour. The trouble? Well, he complained that his rudder was jamming, but the mechanics could not find anything wrong. He had said, also, that his motor was running too hot. Perhaps, the major suggested, with an understanding smile, this one had rather fly alone, *hein?* So many of them would—and especially by way of Paris, or other good towns. Yes, he had given his destination—La Ferte sous Jouarre, but is not that on a direct line for Paris, Monsieur? These youthful ones, would they never learn that this was a serious business? But no, Monsieur, they are young, and how can you make one fear discipline who daily faces death? Poof! It was the grave problem.

McGee left Vitry with his own conclusions. So Siddons had pulled a forced landing in order to go for a joy-ride. Now he was off having a fine time and would claim that his delay at Vitry was so long that he thought it best to head for La Ferte. Well, they would have him there. He had not reckoned that Cowan would send someone back.

4

Upon McGee's return to the squadron, Cowan was too busy to see him, nor did he send for him until after mess that night. When McGee arrived at the Major's temporary quarters he found him in company with Mullins, the Operations officer, and both were bending over a large map spread out on the table.

Cowan looked up with the quick, exasperated nervousness which he always displayed when interrupted.

"Well!" he barked, crisply.

"You sent for me, sir?"

"Yes, yes. I had forgotten. What about Siddons?"

McGee had decided to shield Siddons to the extent of not reporting the fact that the mechanics at Vitry had found nothing wrong with the plane. A squealer gains no friends in the Army.

"I don't know where he is, Major. He landed at Vitry, complaining of a jamming rudder and heating

engine. He took off again in an hour. He hasn't showed up yet. Perhaps he thought it best to go on to La Ferte."

"Humph!" Cowan retorted, the pointed ends of his moustache twitching. "Maybe he did! He needs grounding. I'd send him to Observation if the Chief of Air hadn't ordered us to quit using observation work for punishment. They crack up those crates too fast. And Siddons is just the kind to do that sort of trick. He's a good flyer, certainly, but—what would you do with him, McGee?"

"Oh, I say now—"

"Rats! Mullins, how would you handle him? He's a cold fish, you know."

Mullins gulped. He was not accustomed to having Cowan ask his opinion about anything. However, here was a golden opportunity.

"Cold or hot, I'd let that bird cool off a little more on the ground. He's been joy-riding ever since we drew ships. We'll go into action soon, don't you think?"

"Doubtless."

"Keep him out of the first patrol. He'll come whining to you and he'll sit up and be nice from then on."

"Hum-m!" Cowan again bent over the maps.

"Anything else, Major?" McGee asked.

"No . . . Yes, wait!" he called as McGee reached

the door. "You have had a lot of combat experience, Lieutenant. I don't mind telling you that the load of responsibility gets heavier as we approach action." He turned away from the table, walked to the window, and stood gazing out into the utter blackness of the night. "I wonder," he mused, his voice subdued, "if any of you truly appreciate the weight of the responsibility."

Mullins glanced at McGee, wonderingly. Both were thinking the same thoughts. Here was a man, who, until the last forty-eight hours, had always been quite sufficient unto himself. Now a sudden change had come over him. One of two things was certain: either he was breaking, and would soon be taken from command for inefficiency; or he was a strong man indeed, strong enough to admit weaknesses, unblushingly seek aid, and make use of all available knowledge.

Mullins, in his own mind, decided it was the former; McGee, in his mind, was confident that it was the latter, and he warmed to him.

"No matter," Cowan himself made reply to his unanswered question as he turned from the window with much of his old self-confidence. "Responsibility is a thing which command imposes—and which I accept. However, that does not prevent me from profiting by the experience of others, as I expect to do in your case, McGee."

"If I can help—"

"You can. A recent report from General Mitchell declares that casualties from all causes have been as high as eighty per cent per month in squadrons at the front. That's pretty stiff! Fortunately, the General points out, the enemy losses have been as great, or even greater. I don't want to leave a stone unturned that may help us to decrease that percentage in this pursuit group—and *increase* it among the enemy! Here, take a look at this map, McGee."

He stepped to the table and with a pencil drew a circle around a spot south of Epernay. "We are here," he said. "The lines are here." He moved the pencil to the northwest of Epernay, where the heavy black lines indicating the front crossed the Marne. "Notice that the lines swing southwest through Comblizy and la Chapelle, then northwest again, back to the Marne, and on to Chateau-Thierry. To-morrow we are to go here." He circled a spot just south of La Ferte sous Jouarre. "See anything peculiar in this situation?" He studied closely the faces of the two junior officers. Mullins offered no reply.

"I think it peculiar that we have come up here, miles out of our way to the north, when our destination is considerably southwest of us," McGee offered.

"Exactly!" Cowan replied, approvingly. "But there is a reason for it—to mislead the enemy. Their Intelligence Department seems to learn of every

move we make, and sometimes learns of it in *advance* of that move. That's the real reason we are here."

"I don't get it," Mullins said, shaking his head.

"The order sending us here came down in the regular way," Cowan explained, "but the order that takes us to La Ferte, to-morrow morning, was highly confidential. I did not disclose it until the moment of our departure, and only then so that anyone forced down would know our destination. There is to be a considerable concentration of air forces on the apex of the salient between la Chapelle, this side of Chateau-Thierry, and Villers-Cotterets, on the other side. It is the beginning of a movement of concentration to drive the enemy back beyond the Vesle. Hence the secrecy, and the effort to mislead the enemy as to our movements."

McGee smiled, somewhat skeptically.

"What's wrong with that?" Cowan challenged.

"The enemy isn't so easily misled, Major," McGee answered. "We learned that lesson on the English front, and learned it through bitter experience. If the Hun doesn't know right now where we are going, he will know of our arrival twenty-four hours after we get there. If he fails to foresee our concentration at this point, he is thick-headed and slow-witted indeed. I, for one, do not consider him slow-witted. About the only secret we keep from him is the order that is never issued."

Cowan frowned. "I suppose you are right. But how does all this information leak through?"

"If I knew that, Major, I'd be too valuable to be a pursuit pilot. If we knew where the leaks were we could plug them by making use of several good firing squads."

"You are right," Cowan agreed, and again bent over the map, studying it with minutest care. "See here," he said at last. "If we flew a true course from here to La Ferte we would parallel the front for several miles. Here, just south of la Chapelle, we'd be within three miles of the line. That's pretty close for a green squadron, don't you think?"

"We'll be closer than that in the next few days—by exactly three miles!" Mullins answered. "Personally, I'd like to have a look-see at the jolly old Hun."

"I don't think you need worry, Major," McGee offered. "It isn't likely that we will run into any of them, and if we should we would so outnumber them that they would establish some new records in high-tailing it home."

"You think so?" Cowan seemed so unduly disturbed over so remote a prospect that McGee found himself again doubting the Major's courage.

"I do. Why, look at our strength! The Boche prefers to have the numerical superiority on his side."

"But you'd take up combat formation, of course?"

"Yes, and in echelon, one flight above another by a margin of three thousand feet. Then, if the beggar wants to jump on that sort of buzz saw, let him come—and welcome."

"There will be time enough to welcome him when we reach our new base—all present or accounted for," Cowan replied. "You have no objection to flying in the top flight with me to-morrow?"

"Why, no sir. Of course not. I'll be honored."

"Bosh! No flattery, Lieutenant. I don't expect it—especially from you."

Seemingly quite exasperated, Cowan turned away, walked quickly to the window and again stood looking out into the night. Mullins winked at McGee and made a quivering motion with his hand, indicating that he thought Cowan was suffering from a case of nerves.

The Major turned from the window and stared at Mullins with a cold, but studious eye. It made the Operations officer exceedingly uncomfortable.

"You forget, Lieutenant Mullins, that a window facing a dark courtyard provides a most excellent mirror. Nerves, eh? Well, we shall see. If a commander seeks counsel, some are likely to think him a fool. If he does not, he *is* a fool. When I said to McGee, 'no flattery' I meant just that. Furthermore, I don't mind telling both of you that I know the regard in which I am held by some—perhaps all—of

the members of this squadron. I even know my nickname, 'Old Fuss-Budget'. Humph! A hard master always wins the name of 'old' something or other. I don't care a hoot about that. I don't care a hoot about the opinions of any man in this group if only the result of their training shows a balance in favor of our country. Am I right or wrong?"

McGee and Mullins were too surprised to offer reply. This was quite the longest speech Cowan had ever made in their presence; certainly it was the most frank.

"Well," Cowan continued, "I have applied the goad whenever and wherever I thought it needed. I have been goaded in turn, and took it without whimpering. I wonder, Lieutenant," he turned to McGee, "if you remember the report you made on that Hun you shot down over our 'drome?"

"Why—yes, sir, I do."

"And the recommendation you tacked on to it?"

"Yes, sir." Pretty warm, this, McGee thought.

"Then you will recall that it did not reflect any too much credit on me, as the man responsible for any failure on the part of any member of this command. But I did not ask you to change the dotting of an I or the crossing of a T. Nor did you hear a word out of me when I received my bawling out. The army is like that. From enlisted man to Commanding General, every fellow thinks he is the only one

with a prod in his side. The truth is, the greater the rank, the higher the responsibility, and the sharper the gaff. I often wish for the quiet, untroubled mind of a buck private—and I thank Heaven that I am only a Major. Which reminds me that I am one, and had better cut out conversation and fall to work."

His expression changed instantly; he became again the nervous, irascible, driving commander.

"As for wanting you in the top flight," he plunged into his quick manner of speaking, "it is because I want someone there whose eyes are trained at picking up enemy planes. Doubtless I will get severely reprimanded for bringing you along, so I had as well get the greatest possible good out of your experience. You will inform Lieutenant Larkin that he is to go in B Flight, with Yancey."

"Very well, sir. But if you really fear any trouble, Larkin will be more effective in the top flight. Altitude means a lot—and I always feel safer when he is sticking around close to me."

"No, I want him with Yancey. We might get separated, and if I draw an ace for myself, I should give Yancey as good a card."

McGee smiled at the pun. "Very well, sir, but while speaking of aces, it's always best to have 'em up. And the higher up the better. Larkin is a great pilot when he has plenty of altitude—right where a lot of the others fall down. Take him with you and let me go with Yancey."

"Oh, very well. I started in to ask for advice and I had as well take it. That will be all to-night, Lieutenant. No, wait! One other thing: Say nothing to anyone about Siddons going off joy-riding. Let them think he is still at Vitry. I want to handle him my own way, without stirring up any comment. If they find out he cut formation on a trumped up hokus-pokus, they would think I should ground him."

Mullins' jaw dropped in surprise and astonishment. "Aren't you going to ground him?" he asked.

"I am not! I'm going to see that he draws some hot stuff. I've a nice little mission all figured out for him."

A glint in Cowan's eyes testified that he was again the self-sufficient commander, confident of his decisions and determined upon his course of action.

CHAPTER VII

Von Herzmann Strikes

1

At dawn the following morning, well behind the German lines in the vicinity of Roncheres, Count von Herzmann's famous Circus was making feverish haste to take the air. Von Herzmann himself was coolly instructing the pilots in the purposes of their coming expedition. His elation was great indeed, and his entire manner, as well as the pleased smile that played over his youthful, handsome face, indicated that he was confident of victory. Confidence, however, was no new trait in von Herzmann. He always possessed it, but it stopped just short of blind egotism. Perhaps therein could be found the reason for his fame and his success. He was no blundering, egobefuddled braggart riding for a fall; he was a splendid pilot, a careful tactician, fearless when fearlessness was needed and cautious when caution would bring greater reward than blind valor. In short, his fame rested securely upon ability. He was one of the idols of his countrymen, and he was a scourge both feared and respected by the allied air

forces. The ships of his Circus were painted in whatever gaudy colors proved appealing to the pilots thereof, but the fuselage of each bore the famous insignia of the Circus—the defiant German eagle with its blood red feet and talons supported on a scroll bearing the legend, *Gott Mit Uns.* And indeed it did seem that this Circus was providentially watched over.

For more than a year the watchword of the French and English had been, "Get von Herzmann." It was an easy phrase to coin, but extremely difficult to execute. Many a French and English pilot had gone gunning for him, but most of these were now in their graves. Those who escaped were a little less enthusiastic in their next search for this skilled airman who had run up a total of more than two score victories.

Von Herzmann, in addition to being a skilled pilot, was as elusive as a ghost. He was here, there, everywhere. Wherever there was a heavy drive or a sturdy, sullen defensive, there could be found Count von Herzmann. The Allies, making use of this knowledge, had sent out many bombing expeditions to blast the nest of this troublesome Circus from the face of the earth, but their deadly bombs fell upon deserted, decoy hangars.

As is always the case, those who exhibit a certain degree of excellence find ready help at the hand of admirers who wish them still further success and ac-

claim. It was so in von Herzmann's case. The German army could ill afford to lose one who was so brilliant in his operations and so firmly established as one of the popular national idols. The German Intelligence Department gave him all possible assistance, thereby not only saving his precious neck but furnishing still more glamorous stories for a populace that was daily becoming more disheartened and weary with war.

On this morning at Roncheres, von Herzmann was again preparing to shake another plum into his lap. Military Intelligence had received word late the previous evening that an American Pursuit Squadron would on the following morning leave from a 'drome south of Epernay and proceed to a new base south of La Ferte sous Jouarre. Doubtless they would parallel the line south of la Chapelle. What could be simpler than to send forth von Herzmann with the full strength of his justly famous Circus to intercept these untried Americans? Here was a ripe plum indeed—to be had for the picking!

Von Herzmann was particularly well pleased. He smiled as he climbed jauntily into his gaudy green and gold Fokker tri-plane. So the stupid Americans had thought to lead the German High Command astray by such a clumsy movement? Ha! They forgot that a good spy system is like wheels within wheels. But they would learn—in time.

Smiling, he examined his twin Spandau machine guns. Then he glanced along the line of ships making up the first flight. Yes, they were ready, awaiting his signal, their idling motors purring like so many contented cats. The smiling, blond von Herzmann lifted his hand in signal. The purring sound changed to the deafening roar of a hundred infuriated jungle cats. The leading plane raced along the green field, and a moment later the first flight of von Herzmann's great Circus leaped into the air, climbed rapidly, and laid a course for a cloud bank hanging over the lines above Comblizy.

How often the youthful, clever von Herzmann had made use of shielding cloud banks, or lacking clouds had placed himself above his adversary, squarely in the blinding sun. One of the two, or both perhaps, would serve him again this morning.

His smile grew broader as he neared the front. It was thrilling, this hunting business, and it was made decidedly easier when Intelligence cooperated fully, as they had done in this instance. He knew the strength of his quarry, their lack of experience, and the report had included the statement that two of the planes were piloted by instructors fresh from the English front, flying English Camels. Two hated Englanders, eh? *Gott strafe* England! He would single them out and take care of them, one at a time. The rest of his command would scatter the others like

quails, and the survivors, not well acquainted with the terrain, would have a nice problem in finding their way to La Ferte. *Himmel!* but it was a pleasing prospect.

2

Major Cowan's squadron had been slightly delayed in starting by two malfunctioning Nieuports. A precious half hour was spent in correcting the difficulty and the sun had changed from a dull red ball to a blinding white disk racing up the eastern sky wall by the time the flights had gained proper altitude and laid a true course for La Ferte sous Jouarre.

The top flight, with Cowan leading, had climbed to twelve thousand feet. B Flight, under Yancey, was some three thousand feet under him and somewhat in advance. This gave the top flight a greater protective power and insured the bottom flight against any surprise attack. Not only were the flights in echelon, but the planes of each unit were also echeloned, each plane being slightly above the one directly ahead. It was a formidable formation, capable of being readily manoeuvered and with each pilot insured the best possible vision.

A few white, vapory clouds hung high over the trenches toward Comblizy, and still heavier banks were to be seen to the south of la Chapelle, hanging

over the Surmelin Valley. In all other directions the sky presented that fathomless blue so well known to all pilots who ascend above ten thousand feet. The open space between these apparently unmoving cloud banks was some three or four miles in width.

Larkin, in the top flight with Major Cowan, had taken up position as the hindermost plane in the group and had, therefore, the greatest altitude. As a rule, he never was satisfied with his altitude until he had pushed his plane somewhere near the limit of its climbing ability. He was a splendid pilot at great altitude, and he had learned from experience that many pilots capable of doing good work at the lower levels flounder around like fish out of water when above twelve thousand feet. This being equally true of friend and foe, Larkin always felt better when he was high enough not to have any worry about someone coming down on him. He preferred having his enemies below rather than above.

This morning, however, he took no thought of the matter. Before taking off Major Cowan had said no more than, "Look sharp when we get south of la Chapelle; head on a pivot, you know." Shucks! Slim chance for any excitement with a group like this. Even if they sighted a small enemy patrol they would have to go merrily on their way and leave the game to someone else. However, a war pilot with skill enough to become such an ace as Larkin needs

little caution about "looking sharp." It is habit with him, and those who fail to develop the habit are only a few hours or days removed from sudden disaster.

There was little enough to see. They were flying westward. Again and again Larkin turned his head around, closed one eye and placing a thumb close to his open eye squinted into the blinding sun. Many times, by the employment of that little trick, he had been able to momentarily diffuse the sun's rays sufficiently to catch the faintest blurred outline of enemy planes sitting in the sun and waiting for the proper moment to dive.

This morning the sun seemed unusually bright and blinding. Somewhat ahead, and to the south, three large French observation planes were coming up toward the lines at la Chapelle. They were just about even, vertically, with the cloud bank over the Surmelin Valley. They would pass almost directly under the bottom flight, led by Yancey.

Larkin watched them, somewhat idly. Photographic mission, probably. Then, with little or no interest in them, his eye ran along the two converging lines of planes that made up Yancey's flight. That moment he noticed McGee's plane cut out of position and zoom up at an angle too steep to be maintained. Then McGee's plane levelled off and was hurled through a series of quick acrobatics. It meant but one thing—manoeuver!

Larkin jerked his head around and squinted into the sun. Not a thing there—at least nothing he could see—and as soon as the stabbing streaks of light left his eyes he glanced toward the cloud bank over the Marne. Nothing there. The three French observation busses, far below, were going gaily on their way. But McGee was still climbing and stunting. Larkin knew that this was no idle exhibition. McGee didn't fly that way. He was trying to draw their attention to something.

Larkin looked ahead at Cowan's plane. That moment the Major dipped his plane twice. Now what in the world did he mean by that? Larkin wondered. Merely that he had noticed McGee and was on the alert? Or did he mean that he too had seen the enemy? Enemy! Where was the enemy?

Again Larkin turned his head to try the sun. Nothing there . . . yes, by George! there was a blur of black spots. But it was such a fleeting view that he could not be sure, and tried again. Blast the sun! It made him blind as a bat!

He closed his eyes to cut out the dancing sparks and pin wheels. He opened them again, and on turning for one more trial at the sun his eye fell upon the cloud bank to the north. Talk about being blind! Blind as a bat was right!

There, dark, dim and shadowy against the cloud were more German planes than he had ever before

seen in one group, and their angle of direction left no question as to their purpose.

Again he tried the sun. Yes, there they were! No question about it now. They were coming down, and in so doing were no longer completely within the eye of the sun. Pretty slick! A group behind to cut off retreat and another group coming out of the clouds at an angle that would intercept the line of flight. And that cloud was fairly raining German planes!

"Well!" Larkin exclaimed aloud. "Here's a how-dy-do!"

The planes to the eastward were looming up with surprising speed, and no one could say when the ones behind and above would open up their murderous guns. What would Cowan do? What would any of these green pilots do in such a dog fight? Larkin looked down at McGee. He was still climbing for all he was worth. Cowan, if he saw anything, was too paralyzed for action. But perhaps he had not seen. Air eyes come through experience, Larkin knew, and something must be done right now.

In the moment that he determined upon a course of action he saw another group of planes come streaming out of the cloud to the south. Curtains! The whole sky was full of planes. Then, as they swerved sharply, he saw the sunlight play on the allied cockade. And how they came! Spads, French Spads! Going up to the front, perhaps, as a covering flight for the

observation crates far below. But now they were swinging into this grand and unexpected melee.

Larkin grinned. "Here *is* a howdy-do—sure 'nuff!" he repeated and went into a tight, climbing turn that brought him squarely around, facing the planes streaming down out of the sun. Taps for Mr. Larkin, he thought, but he would at least give them pause, and by so doing not only provide Cowan with a chance to wake up and manoeuver, but it would give the oncoming Spads the one thing they needed—time!

The lightning-like movements and happenings of an aerial dog fight cannot be followed or seen by any one man. Fortunate indeed is that pilot who can keep track of what is going on around him. One moment he may have a single adversary; the next he is the target for two or more planes. If he shakes them off, or by marksmanship reduces the odds, he may check in for mess that evening; failing to do so, a squadron commander will that night requisition a new pilot.

As Larkin came around on the quickly executed turn he was only faintly conscious of the fact that a considerable group of Fokker tri-planes were sweeping down on him. He gave no thought to the number. His eye was fixed upon a bright green and gold plane in the lead. As he pulled up the nose of his Camel and thumbed the trigger release for his first

burst, he sensed the strange exultation that comes to that man who, facing death in a forlorn hope and knowing there is no escape, accepts all chances and sells his life as dearly as possible.

The diving green and gold plane flashed across his ring sights as the Lewis gun poured forth its first burst. Square into the oncoming plane the tracers poured. Larkin, seeing that he was on, held his nose up until he knew he was about to stall.

The green plane dipped, dived under him, and Larkin noticed another plane flash past him, bent on other game. Then splinters flew from one of his struts and a bullet smacked against the instrument board.

He had lost flying speed on his zoom to get at the green plane. To regain speed, and give life to his laboring motor, he dived sharply.

At the beginning of this dive a glance told him that the green plane had suffered an injury vital enough to cause it to lose all interest in any return to the attack.

During the first flashing seconds of the attack Larkin's mind had been occupied only with the thought of hurling himself at the oncoming planes in the forlorn hope of diverting their course of action for a few brief but precious minutes. Suddenly, now, the fleeing green and gold plane awakened memory. Green and gold! Could that be the plane of the renowned von

Herzmann, who from the beginning of his fame had advertised himself as the man who always flew a brightly painted green and gold plane?

Another Fokker dived at Larkin, his Spandaus rattling. His aim was wild and he overshot Larkin's steep dive. But in that dive, which brought him all too close, Larkin caught sight of the insignia on the plane—a German eagle perched on a lettered scroll. It was von Herzmann's Circus!

Larkin's heart leaped. He kicked his left rudder savagely and wheeled left, thundering after the green and gold plane that was streaking homeward. Get that plane, get that plane! ran through his mind. All else faded. The presence of other planes, and his original plan, all were lost sight of in the pulse-quickening realization that he had crippled the plane of the famous ace in that first burst. Now to get him and bring him down! Von Herzmann was not one to cut and run unless there was an urgent reason for it. He was trying to tool a crippled plane back across the lines. Larkin, determined to make the most of this golden opportunity, forthwith lost sight of all else.

Ta-ka-ta-ka-ta-ka-ta-ka! Crash! Splinters flew from Larkin's cowling and two gashes suddenly appeared in the fabric of his left wing. So! The crippled eagle had loyal kingbirds for protectors, and they had plunged, pecking, at the Camel pursuing their leader.

Larkin dived clear of the streaming bullets, zoomed upward into a half loop and rolled into position to fire at the leading attacker. The German was slow and Larkin poured a stream of lead into the cockpit. He saw the pilot stiffen, as one who has received a sudden shock or surprise, and then slump down. The plane thundered on for a moment, then nosed down, out of control.

Ta-ka-ta-ka-ta-ka-ta-ka! Larkin saw tracers zipping past the nose of the plane. He side-slipped, out of the line of fire, and glanced back. Two more kingbirds coming to the relief of the fleeing eagle.

Ta-ka-ta-ka—the Spandaus again began their monotonous, metallic stutter. Into the cockpit of Larkin's plane streamed a half dozen deadly pellets. Two of them pinged against the instrument board, another passed completely through the cockpit, just in front of his stomach. He felt suddenly cold at the nearness of death as he zoomed steeply into a quivering stall and slipped off into a spin.

He was conscious of the fact that both the Fokkers were thundering after him. Then a Camel, with the speed of a thunderbolt, flashed across his line of vision. He could see the Lewis gun quivering with little excited jumps as it poured out lead. Good old McGee! He always turned up when needed most.

Larkin neutralized the stick, then ruddered hard left against the spin, and thus stopped the tail spin.

Then, gaining speed by a quick dive, he looped with a suddenness that brought the Camel squarely on the tail of the remaining pursuer who was diving steeply. Both guns began jumping with delight as Larkin thumbed the releases. What luck! Square in the ring sight! The telltale tracers poked their white fingers into the vitals of the Fokker tri-plane. A serpent-like tongue of red licked out, fluttering for a moment like a wind blown candle flame, and then leaped afresh in an enveloping burst of flame and smoke.

Two!

He glanced around. McGee was in a merry game with the other kingbird. Round and round they plunged in steep spirals, each trying to get a glimpse of the other across the sights. A tight, breath-taking game, but one which cannot last long. The circle becomes too small, the pace too swift. It was a game in which, Larkin knew, the tri-plane Fokker could excel the Camel, granting that the pilots were of equal skill.

Larkin jockeyed for position, but in that moment when his eye was taken from the mad game of ring-around-the-rosy, McGee demonstrated that the skill was not equally placed. The Fokker was now spinning down, obviously out of control, and McGee was following, filling it with enough lead to sink it. It spun earthward, sickening in its erratic gyrations.

McGee pulled up on his stick, banked sharply,

bringing himself alongside Larkin. They waved to each other, exultantly. Larkin, who a few minutes ago had decided that his luck had played out its string, swallowed his heart, murmured "Whew!" and surveyed the field.

The green and gold plane of von Herzmann was now a rapidly diminishing speck against the cloud bank toward la Chapelle, streaking for the Fatherland. The others, lacking a leader, and facing unequal chances with the timely and unexpected appearance of the French Spads, were withdrawing from the action with all the speed they could get out of their wonderful motors. And that was speed enough.

The French Spads had come out of a cloud bank just in time to upset the well laid plans of the German ace, and that worthy, never expecting such a dare-devil, self-sacrificing move as made by Larkin, had for once been taken by surprise. He had been damaged enough to force immediate retirement. The celerity with which his group abandoned the project and followed in his wake gave glowing tribute to the true value and leadership of that youth who flew the green and gold plane. With him as leader, they would have taken a toll, despite the unexpected arrival of the Spads. But with von Herzmann, their idol and their pride, forced from the fight by a hated Englander flying a dinky little Camel—well, the Fatherland could be served some other day.

But von Herzmann had been right in his boast that he would scatter the Americans like quails. As the French Spads pursued the fleeing Fokkers, which were numerically strong enough to make a too vigorous pursuit unwise and unhealthy, Major Cowan took up the task of gathering his brood. He flew around, bringing them together, signaling instructions to take up positions, and pointing westward along the line of flight. Three of his brood, however, were crushed and crumpled fledglings on the ground far below. Carpenter, and fat, jolly little McWilliams, had collided while engaging an enemy. Their crumpled wings had locked fast in an embrace that spun them down dizzily to a crashing, splintering death. And Nathan Rodd, he who spared his words, had also been a bit too provident or tardy with his fire and had been sent down out of control. Cowan had avenged Rodd a second later, sending his attacker down spinning and thereby gaining his first victory.

The score, in that far flung encounter, stood one in favor of Cowan's squadron, but it was a heavy-hearted group of pilots who at last took up formation and headed westward. Their faces had a new, grim look. Flying was not all a matter of shooting the other fellow down. Those who had witnessed the sickening crash of Carpenter and McWilliams learned at a tragic cost that one must be all eyes. The gateman, who controls the airways of the skies, was

taking his toll, and every one of the group that flew westward toward La Ferte, leaving three comrades behind, now more soberly considered the alarming casualty figures of eighty per cent per month—and wondered!

A month! It is such a little while.

CHAPTER VIII

McGee Makes a Discovery

1

THREE nights later, while members of the squadron were engaged in the usual after mess gab fest, an orderly entered with a summons for McGee and Larkin to report to Major Cowan. Larkin had just that day secured a misfitting regulation issue uniform from the Supply Officer, Robinson, and the group had been having a great deal of fun at his expense. Yancey now saw another chance.

"Old Fuss Budget is goin' to have you shot for impersonatin' an officer in that scarecrow riggin'," he taunted. "You should have kept your old uniform on, like McGee."

"Huh! Robinson didn't have one small enough for McGee," Larkin retorted. "They only have men's sizes in the American Army. What's wrong with this uniform?"

"Uniform?" Yancey repeated. "Oh, I thought it was a horse blanket."

Larkin thumbed his nose at Yancey as he passed through the door with McGee. He knew the Major

would have a long wait if he stayed to get ahead of Yancey.

Major Cowan appeared to be in an unusually happy frame of mind.

"I've good news for you," he announced as they entered the headquarters hut. "In losing Carpenter, McWilliams and Rodd, we have gained you two. And instead of the bawling out I expected, I was congratulated for unusual foresight. The order assigning you to this squadron will be down to-morrow. I hope you are as well pleased as I am."

"Of course we are," McGee answered for both. "We wouldn't feel so much at home anywhere else. I'm sorry, of course, to come as a replacement for any one of those other chaps. They were fine fellows."

"Of course," Cowan responded, heartily. "Their loss demonstrates the value of experience. There was no reason at all for the collision between Carpenter and McWilliams. They simply forgot there was anyone else in the air. A tough break."

"Any break is a tough one when you don't come back," Larkin said.

The Major seemed to see him now for the first time. "Where in creation did you get that gunny sack you're wearing?" he demanded.

Larkin grinned, foolishly. "From Lieutenant Robinson, sir."

"What's it supposed to be?"

"A uniform, sir."

"Thanks. I didn't know." He turned to McGee, who still wore his British uniform. "Didn't Robinson have any more masquerade costumes?"

"Not my size, sir."

"Oh, you go in for size? I see Larkin doesn't. Why don't you get uniforms?"

"We haven't had a chance, sir," Larkin answered. "There is no tailor around here, so I chinned Robinson out of this enlisted man's issue. Perhaps," he offered, smiling, "the Major will give us a pass to Paris to have uniforms made."

"The Major will not! We've some real work ahead. But—"

The door opened and Siddons entered.

"But don't put that thing back on in the morning," Cowan completed. "Your British uniform is at least presentable."

"You sent for me, sir?" Siddons spoke from the doorway, his voice having the quality of one who is extremely bored—especially bored with being sent for.

"I did." Cowan's voice was crisp. The ends of his moustache began twitching jerkily. "I suppose you wonder why I have said nothing to you about your failure to rejoin the squadron the other day after you cut out at Vitry?"

"Why, no sir," Siddons responded, perfectly at ease. "You said that if any of us developed trouble that delayed us, to come on here at the earliest possible moment. I was here when you arrived."

"So you were." Cowan was making a stern effort to control his temper. "And it is true that I gave you orders to come on here should delaying trouble develop. But," he shot a quick, silencing look at McGee, "I conducted a little investigation into your landing at Vitry, Lieutenant, and I discovered that you took off again within an hour."

Siddons started, almost imperceptibly. His face colored, for a moment, but he quickly assumed his habitual nonchalance. It goaded Cowan to an inward fury, but he controlled himself well.

"I suppose you can think of some reason why I shouldn't ground you," Cowan said.

"Why, no sir. No reason at all."

"Then I can!" the Major snapped. "You like joyriding, eh? Like to tour France, eh? Very well, I'm going to give you a bit of it to do."

He turned and walked over to a large wall map. "Take a look at this—all three of you," he said. "This is a detailed map of our sector. G2 believes that the Germans are planning to strike north of here, perhaps just south of Soissons. One of their reasons for this suspicion is that information has reached G2 to the effect that Count von Herzmann's Circus has

pulled out from Roncheres. Where is he now? That's the question! The Intelligence sharks at Great Headquarters believe that if we can locate his new base we will know something more about the plans of the enemy. As a result, every squadron along this front has been ordered to make an effort to locate his new position. Personally, I am of the opinion that Larkin winged him the other morning, and as a result his Circus has been withdrawn, pending his recovery."

Larkin shook his head regretfully. "I wish I could think so, Major. I'd like to boast that I had given von Herzmann a little lead poisoning. But I don't think so. The tracers showed that my burst was going into his motor. I winged that, all right, but he didn't fly like a wounded man."

"Modest enough," Cowan approved. "It seems that G2 thinks the same thing. They have reason to believe that he is in the neighborhood of this point here,"—he put a finger on the map—"where the railroad between Soissons and Chateau-Thierry crosses the Ourcq."

He turned now directly to Siddons, his eyes cold and piercing. "Lieutenant Siddons, you seem to be a most excellent map flyer. You find your way here alone, and you tour this part of France with admirable ease. To-morrow morning, if the visibility is good, you will take off at dawn, cross the line above Bouresches, push on toward Bonnes and as far inland

as the railroad crossing on the Ourcq—if possible. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, sir." Siddons was as unconcerned and unruffled as though he had received an order to fly to Paris.

"You will get the greatest possible altitude before crossing the line, and you are to avoid combat. Your mission is to bring us information, if possible, concerning the location of enemy 'dromes—and especially von Herzmann's base. Am I clear?"

"Perfectly, sir."

One could not but admire the cool confidence of the fellow. His complacency was not what Cowan had expected.

"If you think the risk is too great, alone," Cowan said, after watching his face for any hint of quailing, "I will send two other planes with you. They might help reduce the odds in case of unavoidable combat."

"Oh, that's not necessary," Siddons replied. "In fact, one plane has a better chance to escape combat, especially if there are some clouds to duck into. Anything else, sir?"

Cowan made a clicking sound with his tongue. The fellow wasn't human; he was an iceberg!

"That is all. And I wish you luck."

"Thank you, Major. And thanks for the mission." He gave McGee and Larkin the pitying look of one who has just drawn the grand prize in an open com-

petition, and without another word turned quickly and passed through the door.

Cowan's face had a baffled look. "Well," he finally said, "he acts like a gamecock, anyhow."

"Do you realize the danger of the mission?" McGee asked.

"It's not for me to consider that angle," the Major replied. "G2 wants information, and I am under orders to help supply it. Danger? Yes. That's war. If we lose—well, I'd rather not discuss it."

At that moment the door opened. There, framed against the night, stood Nathan Rodd! In salute he brought a gauze-wrapped hand to his head, a head so thickly swathed in bandages that only his face was showing and his service cap sat perched at a ridiculous angle.

"Lieutenant Rodd reports for duty, sir," he said.

Cowan, McGee and Larkin had stood transfixed, as men might who thought they were seeing a ghost. But Rodd's words, concise and strikingly characteristic of the taciturn Vermonter, snapped them into action. This was no ghost!

"Rodd!" Major Cowan exclaimed, and rushed across the room to grip Rodd's unbandaged left hand. "You here?"

Rodd considered it unnecessary to waste words on so stupid a question. He merely offered his hand, when the Major released it, to McGee and Larkin,

who were pounding him on the back in great glee.

"We thought you were dead," Cowan said.

"So did I—until I woke up," Rodd answered.

Cowan, noting the pallor of his face, pressed him into a chair. "Tell us about it," he urged. "Were you badly hurt? What happened? Didn't you crack up—"

Rodd lifted his good hand in protest. "One question at a time, Major. That German found my motor and it conked. I regained control just in time to level off, but not in time to miss a tree. After that I don't know what happened. Came to, flat on my back, fifty feet away from my plane. It was burning. That's all there is to it."

"All there is to it!" Cowan snorted. "You're not sending a telegram. Words won't cost you anything. Where have you been since then?"

"Hospital. Waiting for a chance to skip out."

"You mean—you ran away from the hospital?"

Rodd nodded.

"You are crazy, man! Why did you leave?"

"I don't like hospitals."

"But you are hurt! Is your head badly injured?"

"Cut."

"And your hand?"

"Cut."

Cowan could not escape laughing. McGee and Larkin joined in.

"I'm not laughing at your injury, Lieutenant," Cowan explained, "but at your way of telling it. If that should happen to Yancey he'd write a book about it. Of course, I'm delighted to see you alive. I had the good fortune to wipe out the one that shot you down. He went down spinning."

"See him crash?" Rodd asked.

"No. Things were pretty thick. I didn't have time to watch."

"Didn't kill him," Rodd announced.

"What!"

"He made a better landing than I did. He was trying to bring me to when some Frenchies came running up and nabbed him. Decent fellow. The Frenchies treated him pretty rough. Put the screws to him, I guess."

"See here," Cowan leaned forward in his chair, "either tell all this story, or back you go to the hospital. You say the French questioned him?"

"French Intelligence did. Pretty game fellow, they said."

"But he talked?"

"Had to. That was von Herzmann's Circus."

"We know that. Anything else?"

"Yes. He said they knew all about our plans, and were out gunning for us."

Cowan's face colored, but with confusion more than anger.

"Anything else?" he asked crisply.

"Well—the Frogs found out something else, but," he cast a quick, furtive glance at McGee and Larkin, "but I guess I've talked enough. Someone is talking too much, that's certain."

Cowan had seen the glance, and the inference irritated him. "These officers have proved their loyalty by service, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir," was Rodd's meatless reply.

McGee felt genuinely hurt, but at the same time he recognized the fact that Rodd's statement was all too true.

"Rodd is quite right, Major," he said, and arose from his chair. "If he has any real information, it belongs to you alone—or to G2. If you've nothing further, Larkin and I will be going."

"No, nothing further."

"No orders for to-morrow morning?"

"No."

"May I speak to you a moment—privately?"

"Certainly."

They moved over near the door.

"You gave Siddons a mission I would like to have, Major. Any objections if I take a little joy-ride in the morning?"

Cowan's eyes narrowed. "Where?" he asked.

"Over the lines. I'd like to do a little looking for myself."

"With Larkin?"

"No, sir. Alone. Don't even want Larkin to know I'm going. I think I know where to locate von Herzmann's Circus."

"What are you driving at, Lieutenant?"

"Major, if I told you half of what I think I know, you'd call me crazy."

"Hm-m! Well, I can't give you permission to go—but I will not be looking for you before noon." His sly wink told Red all that he wanted to know.

"Yes, sir. Good night, Major. Good night, Rodd. The gang will be mighty glad to see you back, old hoss! Come on, Buzz, let's go to bed."

Outside the door Larkin's fuming rage exploded. "Say, what did that tongue-tied sap Rodd mean by that dirty dig? If his head wasn't already in a sling, I'd—"

"Calm yourself, brother!" Red laughed. "If you had landed on your head from as high a point as he did, and then found out it was all brought about through a leak, you'd be suspicious of everyone too."

"Maybe so," Larkin answered, somewhat mollified. "What were you buzzing old Fuss Budget about?"

"I'll tell you that to-morrow night—maybe."

"Humph!" Larkin snorted. "I guess Rodd's disease is catching. You're tongue-tied too!"

Without reply Red led the way across the flying

field to their hut. Entering, he began fumbling around in the dark for a candle stub. Larkin took up the search, by the aid of flickering matches, but the candle was nowhere to be found.

"It's a fine war!" Larkin growled, as he began undressing in the dark. "All the letters from the States bear the postmark, 'Food Will Win The War.' I guess the Army is trying to save on candles, too."

2

Before sunup the following morning McGee awoke and began quietly dressing. He did not want to awaken Larkin. When he had finished dressing he tiptoed cautiously across the floor, opened the creaking door ever so slowly and closed it with the same care.

Dawn was just streaking the east. A few birds were offering their first roundelays; the grass and trees were wet with a light rain that had fallen during the night, and to the northeast the distant guns were rumbling their morning song of hate—evil dispositioned giants, guttural in their wrath when dawn awoke them to a new day of devastation. Two or three sleepy-eyed air mechanics were making their way toward the hangars.

McGee stood for a moment outside the hut, studying the sky, which was a patchwork of clouds scat-

tered across grey splotches that would turn to blue with the coming of the sun. Evidently the sky had been quite overcast during the night, but the clouds were broken now, though by no means dispersed.

It was an ideal morning for crossing the lines. Convenient cloud banks were excellent havens in case of surprise, and Archie fire was less accurate when the gunners had to contend with a ship that plunged into concealing clouds and out again at the most unexpected places. Of course, those same clouds offered concealment for enemy planes, but a pilot crossing the lines alone is considerably advantaged by such a sky as McGee was now studying approvingly.

As McGee started toward the hangars he saw that some of the ground crew were wheeling out Siddons' Nieuport. Well, the Major had stuck to his resolution and the order had gone through.

"Where's Lieutenant Siddons going?" McGee asked the Ack Emma who was making a careful check of the plane.

"Don't know, sir. Got orders last night to have her ready."

"Did Sergeant Williams get orders for my plane?"

"Yes, sir. Are you and Siddons goin' over on patrol, Lieutenant?"

"I can't answer for Siddons," McGee evaded. "You'd better ask him."

"Huh! A lot of good it would do. Honest, Lieu-

tenant, that fellow talks less to us than a cigar store Indian talks to the customers—and that's less than nothin'. He thinks we're worms!"

McGee was about to offer his sympathies when another crew, under Sergeant Williams, came rolling the Camel out to the line. McGee began checking it over with the same minute care which had doubtless gone a long way toward making him an ace. He left inspection to no man. His air mechanic, knowing this, was equally careful in his work. This diminutive lieutenant was as mild as an April morning so long as all was well, but when something went wrong he could say more than a six foot Major-General.

"All set, Sergeant?" McGee asked, finishing his inspection.

"All set, sir. I just put a new valve in that wind driven gas pump. The guy that invented that trick should have been tapped for the simples. Why don't you hang this thing on a church steeple, Lieutenant, and get one of those Spads?"

"Well, I rather dislike entering a church from the steeple, and I'm sort of partial to this old crate. She's tricky on the ground, but I'm used to her ways and she's a Lulu upstairs."

He swung into the cockpit and the Sergeant stood at the prop.

"Switch off?"

"Switch off!"

The sergeant pulled over the propeller two times.

"Contact, sir."

"Contact."

The motor caught, and after it had idled a few minutes McGee began revving it up.

Just then he noticed Siddons come from around the corner of the hangar, carrying what appeared to be a canvas covered pillow. Seeing McGee's plane on the line he stopped in surprise, then proceeded to his plane, where he fitted the pillow into the seat, patting it in place as a woman pats a divan pillow. Then he came across to the side of McGee's plane.

"Did you get orders, too?" he shouted.

McGee cut the gun. "No," he answered truthfully. Satisfied that this would not end the questioning, he added, "The Ack Emma has made some repairs. I'm going to give her a test."

"Oh, I see. Thought maybe I was going to have the pleasure of your company—and your help. Nice morning for my little jaunt, isn't it?"

"Bully!" McGee looked at him closely to discover any hint of fear. It simply wasn't there, and Red was forced to the mental admission that he had never seen such a cool, confident manner displayed by any pilot going over for the first time. "Good luck!" he called, and again began revving his motor.

Siddons turned back to his own plane, and with the most casual inspection, and with no comment to

the mechanic, crawled into his cushion padded seat.

McGee, satisfied with the sound of his own motor, nodded to the wing boys to remove the chocks, and taxied to a quick take-off. At two or three hundred feet he turned, came back across the 'drome and headed in the general direction of Paris, climbing steadily and maintaining the direction until to the watching ground crew he became lost to view.

Then McGee swung north and began working back eastward. He passed to the west of La Ferte, and having gained an altitude of fifteen thousand feet, headed directly for the front, intending to cross the line to the north of Belleau and proceed toward Fere-en-Tardenois. Then, if fortune favored him, he could decide upon a deeper thrust into enemy territory.

The cloud strata was exceptionally deep and yet ragged enough to provide frequent glimpses at the world below. The one great danger lay in the fact that he might any minute come unexpectedly upon a German pursuit group. It was probable, however, that on such a morning they would be operating at a lesser altitude.

The trenches, as he crossed the line, were only faintly discernible, the detail obscured by the blue ground haze so common to the eyes of the pilot operating at high altitudes. But the strip of barren land on each side of the trenches gave visible evidence of the grimness of the struggle far below, and here

and there along the line, miniature geysers spouted fan-shaped eruptions of earth with a grotesque, unexpected suddenness. Then a second later a new pock-mark on the face of an already over-tortured earth showed where the shell had exploded.

It was fascinating to watch. Nerve-racking and ear-splitting as it must be to the mud-splashed creatures in the trenches below, from on high the land within the neighborhood of the zig-zag trenches took on the appearance of a pot of boiling mush—here a crater, there a crater, springing into being with an amazing suddenness that lured the observer into the game of guessing when the next crater would appear.

McGee was engaged in exactly such mental speculation when he was brought to the realization of his own nearness to war by the plane-rocking explosion of a well-placed Archie. Then two other giant black roses bloomed directly in his path. Now he was presented with his own guessing game. Where would the next one be?

He swerved sharply left and dived toward a neighboring cloud. A cloud, while seeming from below to have both form and substance, is in reality but little different from a dense ground fog. It is enveloping, misty, eerie, and cuts off all visible contact with the world. If it covers a large air area, then the pilot may face some nice problems in correct and stable navigation, but if it is only a patch, he drives straight

along his course, knowing that he will plunge out into the sunlight with the same suddenness with which he left it. Clouds are particularly welcome when Archie gunners begin to plaster the air with high explosive shells.

As McGee came out of this cloud, his attention was drawn to a number of black bursts some three thousand feet below, but which clustered around a lone Nieuport flying at a forty-five degree angle to the line of flight which McGee was pursuing. That Archie crew knew their business, and McGee thought they appeared uncomfortably near the Nieuport. Then, as he watched, the Nieuport did a strange thing. Instead of making a sudden change in direction or a quick dive, either of which would compel the gunner to make another quick calculation in his range, it merely rolled once, then dipped twice, and proceeded on its way. The Archie fire ceased as suddenly as it had commenced.

McGee streaked across another open patch of sky and entered another cloud. Coming out of this one he again spotted the lone Nieuport and corrected his own line to correspond with that of the lone flyer below. Now, studying it more closely, and with more time, he felt sure that it was Siddons' plane. One thing certain, the red, white and blue cockades established it as an American manned plane, and who, save a novice, McGee reasoned, would roll and make a

slight dip to escape Archie fire. That particular battery must have been too convulsed by laughter to continue their fire. Had that stupid pilot, whoever he was, forgotten what he had been told concerning Archie fire?

With the same surprising suddenness with which Archies always proclaim their presence, three more black puff balls inked the air directly ahead of the Nieuport. They were off the mark, but they furnished data for other guns which began filling the air. Evidently the gunners had not yet seen McGee, who was much higher and considerably behind the Nieuport, for they were concentrating on that plane.

To McGee's surprise the Nieuport again rolled, then dipped twice, and the guns below immediately ceased firing. McGee decided it was time to seek the seclusion of a nearby cloud and while driving through it, do a little thinking.

What he had just witnessed was enough to make any experienced pilot think. Someone, flying a Nieuport, had a most novel way of treating with anti-aircraft gunners. He merely rolled over, straightened out, dipped twice, and the guns promptly left off their quarreling. No one could be stupid enough to reason that such manoeuver would discomfit the gunners, and yet in this case the effect was more efficacious than any manoeuver yet invented.

McGee smiled at the stupidity of the thought. It

was effective only because it was a signal, prearranged and understood by the anti-aircraft gunners. The pilot of that Nieuport was in communication with the enemy, and McGee believed that man to be Siddons!

It all came to him in a flash. Who, better than Siddons, could have supplied the enemy with the information that brought them over to bomb the green squadron when they were stationed near Is-Sur-Tille? Someone supplied it, for Cowan had found in the pocket of the German flyer whom he, McGee, had brought down, an order disclosing the very fact that the raid had been planned on Intelligence reports. And where had Siddons gone that day after landing at Vitry on the slenderest excuse? The French Major said he had taken off within an hour. And the very next morning the squadron stumbled into a net spread by von Herzmann, and but for the timely and unexpected arrival of a large group of French Spads the harvest would have been great indeed. Could it be that Siddons had crossed the lines the previous afternoon, escaping Archie fire by a simple code of air signals, and disclosed the entire plan to the enemy?

McGee felt a hot wave of ungovernable anger sweep over him. He no longer had any doubts whatsoever. Two and two make four. Siddons was a traitor to his country. To his country? No, doubtless he was one of the many who had been trained for years

against this very hour of need. On false records he had gained admission to the American Air Force, and now—

McGee came out of the cloud into the clear sunlight, and began searching the sky for the Nieuport. It was not to be seen. He flew on, encountered other clouds, came out again, but the Nieuport had miraculously disappeared.

McGee flew steadily northeast until he spotted an exceptionally large group of enemy planes, working up from the direction in which he was headed.

It was time to turn around. He was quite too far into enemy territory to feel comfortable, and that swarm of planes made him unusually homesick, even though they were far below him.

But just as he banked into a left turn he noticed that they were nosing down, sharply. He flew along the misty edge of a cloud, watching closely. Down, down, they went, becoming mere specks against the blue-grey ground haze.

They were about to make a landing! There could be no doubt of it, though at this distance and altitude he could not make out their hangars. On down they dropped, until at last they seemed to be engulfed by a greyish sea that shut out all definite form.

McGee had come for information, and here it was within his grasp if he were only willing to take a chance.

The strata of clouds against which he was flying stretched in the general direction of the place where he had lost sight of the large flight of planes.

He ducked into the clouds and drove along until he estimated that he was somewhere in the right neighborhood.

Coming out into an open sky he located a considerable forest far to his right and another one several kilometers directly ahead. Directly between these a ribbon of white marked its twisting course. That would be the Ourcq, and the forest beyond would be the Forest de Nesles. And—yes, there just beyond the river was a town—which McGee concluded must be Fere-en-Tardenois—and a little way from its outskirts a group of drab square blocks that caught and held his eyes.

Too much ground haze to make them out. Well, a chance is a chance, he reasoned, as over went the Camel's nose in a long dive.

Twice he checked the dive, only to dive again. He hated to give up altitude, but he was determined to get a look.

After the third dive, and the loss of several thousand feet, he made out the drab-colored canvas hangars of a German 'drome, and poised on the open field was a veritable swarm of little moths appearing to be drying their wings in the sun. Three of them began racing along the ground and bounded into the

air. At the same minute an Archie battery opened from the town. The burst was wide of McGee's plane, but there was no mistaking their sincerity nor the fact that those three harmless appearing moths below were climbing to the attack.

Red gave his Camel all he thought it could stand as he climbed for the protecting clouds. Information was of no value if sealed by a dead man's lips. He had learned far too much this morning to chance any fight with anyone that could possibly be avoided.

The Archie fire continued until he had regained the clouds, and even then two or three more shells burst harmlessly somewhere ahead in the grey mist wall. He changed his direction sharply and roared along on a full throttle.

His heart was racing with his motor. He felt convinced that the 'drome he had located was a new base for the squadron he had just seen, for were they not coming up from the interior? Doubtless he had stumbled on to a movement of some importance. Just how important he could not know, but G2 would be delighted with such information. Could that squadron, he wondered, by rare good fortune be the Circus of the famed von Herzmann?

Over Etrepilly an Archie battery hurled aloft a smashing, plane-staggering burst of black puff balls. A jagged piece of steel tore through his left wing. Too close, that!

He dived steeply. More shells burst above him. Above, but still uncomfortably close. Those gunners were real marksmen.

Suddenly he thought of what he had seen the lone Nieuport do. It might be worth trying. Acting on the impulse he rolled, straightened out, then dipped twice. One more shell came screaming aloft and then the batteries became abruptly silent.

Well, that was that! There could be no question now as to the movement being a prearranged signal. Archie gunners would not ordinarily leave off firing at any such stupid performance—they would chuckle while they locked the breach on another shell, and forthwith blow that fellow into Kingdom Come.

McGee was in high fettle as he streaked across the lines south of Belleau and laid a course for home. He had a great deal to report, and someone, flying a lone Nieuport, was going to have a great deal of explaining to do.

3

When McGee swooped low over his own hangar, preparatory to a landing, he was surprised to see Siddons' Nieuport resting on the tarmac. So he was back so soon!

Larkin was the first to greet McGee when he crawled from his plane.

"Where've you been?" he demanded.

"Oh, just up for a little test," McGee replied, assuming an air of indifference.

Larkin pointed to the jagged hole through the fabric of the left wing.

"Don't kid me!" he said. "Where'd you pick up that little souvenir?"

"I'll tell you later," McGee answered and started toward the Major's headquarters.

Larkin seized his arm and spun him around. "You'll tell me one thing right now, little feller! What's so funny about hiding my uniform so I'll get bawled out again by Old Fuss Budget for wearing this misfit?"

McGee looked at him blankly.

"What do you mean?"

"Mean? I mean you got up so early a respectable milkman wouldn't think of being up, and with your brain a bit foggy you thought what a clever idea it would be to hide my English uniform and give this gang of Indians another day of pleasure. What's the big idea?"

McGee shook his head. "I never touched your uniform, Buzz. Come to think of it, though, I don't remember seeing it this morning while I was dressing. Did you see it last night?"

"See it last night!" Larkin snorted. "How could I? We couldn't find the candle and it was so blasted dark

that I hung my shoes on a chair and my pants on the floor. Quit foolin', Red. Where's that uniform?"

"I don't know, I tell you. But if I were you I'd go ask Yancey that question."

Larkin's eyes snapped. "That's the bozo! That Texas longhorn is just before meeting up with a real cyclone."

"Better go easy," Red warned. "He's used to cyclones, and I've always had a sort of feeling that he could take care of himself in heavy weather."

Nothing daunted, Buzz went bowling off in search of Yancey, and McGee crossed the 'drome to Cowan's headquarters.

The excited enthusiasm with which McGee began his report to Cowan was quickly cooled by the Major's expressionless indifference. Throughout McGee's narration of the events of the morning, Cowan continued studying a sheaf of papers lying on the desk before him, now and then penciling thereon some memorandum or brief endorsement. That part of the report dealing with the actions of the lone Nieuport, which seemed to have a system of signals to insure safe passage over the lines, brought from the Major no more than a throaty, "Hum-m." It angered McGee, and brought from him a heated charge which under other conditions he would have hesitated to make.

"And the man who was piloting that plane is a member of this squadron," he blurted out.

Cowan casually turned a sheet of paper. "Indeed," he replied, continuing his reading. It was maddening.

"Has Siddons reported to you, sir?" McGee asked, pointedly.

"Yes." Cowan arose and looked straight at the flushed young pilot. His eyes were uncommunicative. "Lieutenant Siddons just left here with Colonel Watts, going back to Wing headquarters," he said. "I may tell you, Lieutenant, that the Colonel came down a short time after Siddons hopped off, and gave me a most uncomfortable half hour for sending him over. We will discuss it no further, and I charge you with absolute silence in the matter. You are to say nothing, to anyone, concerning this entire matter. You understand?"

"I understand that I'm to keep silent, sir—but I don't understand the rest of it."

"It isn't necessary that you do. That is all, Lieutenant."

"But what about that 'drome I located at Fere-en-Tardenois? I think it is Count von Herzmann's Cir—"

"You think wrong, McGee, but whatever you think, don't think out loud. That is all, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir. And there are no orders for—"

"Orders will be a little more secret—in the future." Cowan's voice was crisp, and carried a note of dismissal.

"Yes, sir." McGee saluted stiffly, turned on his heel and walked from the room, steaming with anger. Outside the door he picked up a small stone from the newly graveled walk and hurled it singing through the top of a nearby poplar. He simply had to throw something.

"You poor prune!" he addressed himself. "You never did have enough sense to know when you were well off."

CHAPTER IX

Lady Luck Deserts

1

There followed three days of maddening inactivity, during which time the squadron fretted and became as edgy as so many caged tigers. McGee made use of the time by securing a trim fitting uniform, the very sight of which threw Larkin into new outbursts of rage concerning the disappearance of his English uniform. A joke was a joke, when not carried too far, he argued, and admitted that he was exceedingly weary with the comments made concerning the fit of the issue uniform that he was compelled to wear. Every man professed innocence, but Larkin did not believe a word of their stout denials. The manner in which he took the joke was evidence of the irritability caused by the days of inaction. Every member of the squadron was looking for something over which they could quarrel.

Then one night, about nine o'clock, orders came down for a dawn patrol of two flights of five ships each.

Cowan summoned McGee and Larkin to his head-

quarters and gave them leadership of the flights. McGee protested, pointing out that he did not want to gain the honor at Yancey's expense, and particularly since he considered Yancey worthy of the command. But Cowan was sure of the wisdom of the move, and made his own selection of the men who were to go on this first patrol.

The posting of those names on the bulletin board brought shouts of delight from the lucky ones and growls of disgust from those who were not selected.

Even Nathan Rodd, still wearing bandages on his head and right hand, broke his silence and wolfed loudly over the fact that he had been left out.

"Aw, dry up!" some other unfortunate pilot growled at him. "You're still seein' stars from that last crack you got on the head. What do you want—all the luck?"

It was an expression peculiarly fitting to the situation. Some of the names on that bulletin board might next appear in the casualty reports, yet every man wanted his name on the board, firm in the belief that death would somehow pass him by.

In McGee's flight appeared the names of Tex Yancey, Hank Porter, Randolph Hampden, and of all luck—Siddons!

McGee started to make protest, thought better of it, and biting his lips savagely left the group around the board and went to his quarters. Of all the good men

in the squadron, why should that traitorous scoundrel be included and other loyal deserving pilots be left behind? Someone was being pig-headed indeed!

2

Along about two o'clock in the morning the eager pilots, tossing on their beds in a sleeplessness induced by the promise of the coming of dawn, were more fully awakened by the deep and sullen thundering of thousands of big guns hammering at the lines. It was no fitful, momentary outburst; it was the constant earth-shaking roar that presages a drive. To the north and east the sky flickered with the light coming from thousands of cannon mouths. It was like the coming of a summer storm when the thunder god growls his wrath and lightning plays constantly over the giant thunderheads.

There could be no sleep now for the anxious pilots. Something had popped loose up there, and in a few more hours they would be on their way up to witness this far-flung duel.

The flickering, flashing light of cannon fire faded at last before the salmon and rose colored morning light that streaked the smoke clouds lying across the pathway of the coming sun. Long before that orb of light arose, red-eyed, over a new scene of carnage, ten planes were out on the line, motors warming, while

the pilots and mechanics made last minute inspections. Every member of the squadron was present; the unlucky ones to bid good luck to those chosen for the mission and to see the take-off of this first dawn patrol. Their interest was intensified by the throaty rumbling of the distant guns.

It was an hour of high suspense. For this hour every man present had waited with a keen desire that had been his prompter and spur through all the long, wearying months of training. All the schooling in theory was now behind. Experience, that hard teacher, was now at the controls. The school of machine gunnery, where dummies and swift moving targets had served as theoretical enemies, was now to become a real school where the enemy was also armed and where mistakes and misses were likely to hurl the pupil out of the class with never a chance to profit by the mistake.

The dawn patrol! The day! From this hour they would begin to tally their earned victories. On this night, if lucky enough to encounter the enemy, some of them would send in reports that would start them up the ladder toward that coveted rank—an ace! It never entered the mind of any one of them that some enemy pilot, already an ace and rich in experience, might send in a report fattening his record and increasing his fame. No, no! Air battle is made possible only by thoughts of victory.

McGee walked over to Yancey's plane. The gangling Texan was testing his rudder controls and flipping his ailerons with jerky movements of evident impatience.

"I want you to know," McGee said to him, "that I did not ask for this flight. It is yours, by rights."

Yancey's grin was genuinely friendly. "Shucks, that's nothin'. I'm glad to be out. Bein' a flight leader sorter cramped my style anyhow. This way I can do a little free-lancin'—if I see some cold turkey."

"You leave cold turkey alone and stay in formation," McGee replied. "Just remember, old man Shakespeare was talking about the air service when he said 'things are not always what they seem'."

"I'll be good unless I spot some of those German observation balloons. I've a sneaky feelin' I could eat up two or three of those sausages before I come back here for breakfast without havin' my appetite spoiled."

McGee shook his head in serious warning. "Leave them alone, Yancey. They look easy, but the Archie gunners can fill the air around 'em so full of lead that a bee couldn't fly through. And as for flaming onions—boy! We are out on combat patrol, remember. This is no joy-ride."

"Sure. But—"

That moment Major Cowan came running across

the field and hurried up to McGee. His excitement was evident in every movement.

"Orders just came," he began, hurriedly, "for every available ship to proceed to the bridges at Dormans and Chateau-Thierry. Bombers are going up, also. The Germans have started a big drive."

His manner, and the electrifying words, had drawn every man around him in a close circle. "That's what all the gun fire is about—barrages and counter-barrages. Disregard the patrol orders, Lieutenant, and proceed with these two flights to Dormans—at once! You are to do everything in your power to retard the enemy advance, harass their troops, and especially harass their advanced positions and lines of supply. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Good! Take off at once! I will at once get out all other available ships and lead them against the lines at Chateau-Thierry. You've the head start, and must, therefore, take Dormans. Snappy, now!"

A cheer went up from those pilots who a moment before had been cursing the luck that had left them behind. They started running for the hangars.

As McGee climbed into his plane, Yancey "blipped" his motor and shouted, "Who said this wasn't a joy-ride?"

The revving motors drowned out all other sounds. Helmets were given a last minute tug.

McGee looked along the line and lifted his hand. The nine others chosen for dawn patrol signaled their readiness.

Out came wheel chocks, motors roared into the smooth sound of ripping silk as one by one they lurched down across the field and took the air.

The heart of every man in the flight, save McGee's, was racing in tune with his motor. Here was a mission so much more exciting than any dawn patrol.

Harass the advancing enemy! And their line of supplies! Storm down and spew out lead on the bridges where the troops would be crossing! Here was action of the highest order, in which, in all probability, formation flying would be broken up and it would be every fellow for himself.

McGee alone knew the danger and hazard of their mission. In a big push the enemy planes would be out in great number, determined to sweep the air free of resistance. To harass troops, McGee knew, they must fly low. In so doing they would run a constant gauntlet of machine gun and rifle fire, in addition to frequently traversing the line of flight of high angle heavy artillery. It was not pleasant to think of meeting up with one of those big G. I. cans loaded with enough high explosive to demolish a building. Just get in the way of one of them and what would be left could be placed in a small basket. Added to all this was the fact that all altitude was sacrificed, and

a green pilot, out cutting eye-teeth, needs altitude in case of attack.

To McGee the outlook was gloomy enough. Doubtless the venture would run up a stiff casualty list, but every needed sacrifice must be made here! And now! The French and Americans below must not let the Hun break through. Paris, all too near, was the objective of the drive. If they broke through and reached Paris—well, they must not break through!

McGee saw the planes of another American squadron working up toward the front on his left. High above his flight was a large group of French Spads. He watched them, turning his head aloft from time to time. They seemed to be hovering over him and following his course. Far ahead, and below, he could see enemy observation balloons straining at their cables. Black geysers of earth, sand, and mud, were spouting from the tortured strip along the river. The earth below was an inferno of flashing, thundering shells. The front! And the drive was on!

He glanced up again. The French Spads were still above, a trained, experienced group of war hawks sent up to take care of the "upstairs" fighting while the Americans did the dirty work below. Cowan had not mentioned this. Perhaps he did not know of it. McGee knew that in big operations, and especially in such emergencies as this, orders were issued without disclosing the whole plan to all participants. If

each unit obeys and carries out the orders received, then all goes well.

So far, all was well, and McGee was extremely grateful for that protecting flight of Spads.

He determined to cross the river west of Dormans, make a thrust well back of the lines, cut out again over Dormans and then, if luck were with them, repeat the performance. No need to lay plans too far in advance. Too much can happen in the tick of a second—things that knock plans and the planner into a cocked hat.

Below them now was a far-flung battle of raging intensity. German troops could be seen moving along toward the river, and a little farther inland McGee spotted a long line of infantrymen along a road paralleling the river. But they were moving westward, in the direction of Chateau-Thierry, instead of toward the bridgehead at Dormans. And in addition to the marching men, the road was choked with artillery, caissons, ammunition wagons, and ambulances.

Here was an opportunity made to order, and just as McGee was preparing to give the signal, he saw Yancey cut out and dive toward an observation balloon that was being rapidly drawn down by excited winchmen. No use to try to signal Yancey; that wild Texan was off on his joy-ride.

Archies and machine gun fire tried vainly to stop Yancey's wild dive. Flaming onions began surging

upward in their terrifying circlets, but Yancey was as scornful of them as is a Texas steer of a buzzing deer fly. His guns rattled in a short burst and the balloon exploded with a terrific blast of flame and smoke. Yancey's plane rocked perilously. His inexperience in "busting balloons" had come near being his own undoing. But he righted his plane, somehow escaped the hail of shot and steel all around him and came plunging back down the road filled with fear-stricken men and plunging horses, his guns rattling joyously.

McGee, followed by Siddons, Porter and Fouche, swooped along the road from the opposite direction, scattering the troops like chaff. With death raining down on them from opposite but converging points, the German infantrymen broke wildly for cover. Their less fortunate comrades, the cannoneers and drivers of caissons and supply wagons, stuck to their posts, trying to calm the rearing, plunging horses and cursing the inexorable wasps that sent stinging death down on them.

Yancey, in particular, seemed to be in his glory. Half a dozen times he swung around, gained a little altitude, and again went plowing down along the road, his guns jumping and smoking in fiendish delight.

Harass the advancing enemy, eh? And the line of supplies? A job exactly suited to Yancey's heart and spirit.

But McGee was wise in such matters, and having delivered a blow drew off and sought other fields to conquer. It was not wise to stay long in any one place.

He had expected Yancey to follow, but that worthy was too delighted with his find, and when he tired of it at last it was to discover that he was very much alone. Nothing could have suited him better. Now he was answerable only to himself—and to Luck!

He began climbing, and casting an eye over the sky for balloons within striking distance. After all, strafing infantrymen wasn't half as much fun as knocking down balloons. They went up with such a glorious bang! And it was delicious to watch the frightened observer tumble over the side of the basket in an effort to escape by parachute. That last one had somehow gotten fouled in the rigging and had been clawing frantically when the bag exploded. As for that, Yancey had been sorry; not for the man, but because he had wanted to see the parachute *poof-op!* into a suddenly blown white flower at which he might take a few shots by way of testing his aim. Well, maybe he'd have better luck with the next one.

With no thought of danger, and with his heart racing in a new exhilaration which he had never before felt, Yancey started out alone on a career that was to bring him a fame coveted by every man in the squadron, but a fame which they did not care to gain by this most hazardous of war sports—"balloon bust-

ing." Only men who cannot, or will not weigh danger, become balloon busters. And of these was Yancey, the "flying fool" of the squadron, concerning whom there was never any agreement among the others as to whether he didn't know any better or knew better and did it *because* it was dangerous.

* * * *

McGee, with Siddons, Porter and Fouche following, swung eastward toward Dormans. Above them, as a protecting layer, flew Larkin with his flight, and still above them, much higher, were the French Spads.

This state of affairs could not last long, McGee knew. It was only a question of time until German planes would come up and accept the gage of battle. It was a situation, therefore, calling for the greatest effort possible in the shortest length of time.

Every movement below offered positive proof that the enemy were concentrating in the direction of Chateau-Thierry, and if they were in fact making a thrust to the eastward it was only to draw attention from the real objective.

For once McGee decided to disregard the Major's orders and, instead of proceeding to Dormans, swing back and do all he could at the bridgeheads at Chateau-Thierry.

He swung around, and as he banked caught sight of

seven or eight German planes coming up from the northwest. He looked aloft. The Spads had seen them, too, and were closing in.

McGee began climbing, and noted with satisfaction that Larkin, on the alert, was waggling his wings as a signal that he too had seen them and was prepared.

Then, for apparently no reason at all, Siddons cut out of the flight and started streaking it for the lines.

For a brief moment McGee felt a burning desire to take after him and turn his guns loose on him.

"Traitorous hound!" he muttered to himself. "I wondered how you could follow when we were straf-ing those troops. I'll bet anything he never warmed his guns. Of course he wouldn't!"

But just now there was business at hand more urgent than chasing after a man whom he felt sure was both a traitor and a coward.

Above him the Spads were engaged in a merry dog fight with the German Albatrosses. But two of the Germans had somehow eluded them and were diving down on Larkin's flight.

The action of the next moment was too swift for words. The two Albatrosses came bravely on, scorning the odds against them. Larkin's plane engaged the first one, but the second one got in a lucky burst that sent one of the Nieuports nosing down in a disabled effort to make a safe landing. And perhaps the luckless pilot could have saved his life to spend

the rest of the war in a German prison camp but for the fact that the German who had crippled him, tasting blood, wanted a more complete victory. Down, down, he followed the plane, spitting lead at the poor pilot who seemed unable to think of anything except getting to the earth.

As the planes came down to a level with McGee's flight, Red whipped around and closed in on the pursuer. Too late! Flame came curling, licking from the motor of the Nieuport. That second, for the first time, McGee recognized it as Randolph Hampden's ship. Poor Hampden! The only man in the squadron who ever had a good word for Siddons, and now he was going down in flames while Siddons, supposedly his friend, was high-tailing it for home.

With bitterest venom McGee thumbed his trigger releases as he caught a fleeting glimpse of the Albatross in the ring sight. But that German was not only courageous—he was a consummate flyer. He whipped around with surprising speed and came streaming at McGee with both guns going. Head on he came, and there was something about the desperation of the move that told McGee that the battle-crazed fellow would actually ram him in mid-air.

McGee dived. So close was the other upon him that he imagined he could feel the wheels of the undercarriage on his own wings.

He Immelmanned, only to discover that by some

brilliantly rapid manoeuver the German had rolled into position and was rattling bullets into the Camel's motor. Crack! One of the bullets struck a vital part and the motor started limping. McGee's heart came into his mouth. He was disabled and—

That moment Hank Porter and Fouche closed in on the German and Larkin came diving down from above. Three against one! McGee, despite his own predicament, felt like saluting the fellow's dare-devil courage. Larkin could take care of him alone, even should Porter and Fouche fail.

Certain of the outcome of the now unequal struggle, McGee turned the nose of his pounding plane in the direction of the lines near Mezy, and prayed fervently that the failing motor would not conk completely before he reached and crossed the river. He had no desire whatsoever to spend the remainder of the war in a German prison. Even that, however, was preferable to being sent down in flames, and he kept a sharp lookout for any attack that might come from some keen-eyed German looking for "cold meat."

Presently he noticed a shadow sweep across his plane. He glanced up fearfully, and then smiled with delight. It was Larkin, following along to give battle to any or all who might pounce upon his friend. McGee felt a new surge of hope. Why had he even thought he would have to make the trial alone? Larkin, who never deserted, who never failed in a pinch,

had disposed of that German in great haste and was ready for whatever the next few minutes might bring.

For McGee those next minutes were filled with a thousand misgivings. The ship was losing altitude rapidly, and the motor was pounding furiously, but if it would only hold up he could make it.

When he flashed across the river at Mezy, with some eight hundred feet to spare, he turned and waved a light-hearted O. K. to Larkin, and began to look for some landing place free of shell craters.

It was not unlike looking for land in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Barrage after barrage had marked the earth with the deep scarred pocks of war. He must push on toward the rear with the last inch that could be wrung from that motor and then land straight ahead, leaving the outcome to Lady Luck. She had never deserted him completely—

That moment she deserted. The motor conked with a non-stuttering finality. Now for a dead stick landing, straight ahead! If he could only pancake her down just beyond that big hole, maybe she would stop rolling—

He pancaked, but in doing so struck too hard. The undercarriage was wiped out completely. He felt the bound, followed by a terrific up-fling of the tail, and then a thousand stars went shooting before his eyes and it seemed that a lightning bolt rived his brain. Then darkness—and an infinite peace. . . .

CHAPTER X

Medals and Chevrons

1

When McGee next opened his eyes, it was upon a world in which white seemed to be the shockingly outstanding scheme of things. White walls, a white painted fence, which he at last concluded must be the end of an iron bed, and just beyond this, near at hand yet seemingly miles and miles away, a woman in spotless white. He couldn't quite make out her face, in fact all detail was lost in a dim haze that refused to be cleared up by a blinking of the eyes. And there was such a roaring sound, as of a mighty waterfall thundering down into an echoing canyon.

Oh, yes! His head. He tried to lift his left hand to feel of his head, but the muscles failed to respond. Indeed, the arm seemed not only lifeless, but to be clamped firmly across his chest by tight bonds. He tried the right arm. It responded, and the hand came up to touch and wonder at the large bundle of cloth that should be his head.

The woman in white moved toward him, quickly, and he was about to form a question when she faded

before his very eyes, and the thundering waterfall left off its roaring as he floated out of the world of white into a black, obliterating nothingness.

Hours later he again opened his eyes. Again he saw a woman in white at the foot of what he now knew to be a bed. She smiled, a sort of cheery, wordless greeting. He could see distinctly now, and the thunder of the rushing torrent had subsided until it was little more than a wind whispering among the tree tops. But the left arm was still lifeless and numb, and his head felt as large as a tub.

"Where am I?" he asked, and was startled by the feebleness of the voice which seemed in no way related to him.

The woman in white bent over him, smoothing the pillow and pressing him back upon it.

"You must be quiet," she said, "and not talk, or try to move."

Funny thing to say. Why shouldn't he talk—especially when he had so much to learn about this strange place?

"But where am—"

The figure in white began fading away again, a most distressing habit, and darkness again rushed at him from the white walls.

Hours later he again opened his eyes, realizing at once that it was night, though objects could be dimly seen by the glow of the one light at the far end of the

room. He could hear voices, and with a slight turn of the head saw a man in uniform talking with the white-clad woman who could so suddenly and miraculously disappear. At the movement the man turned quickly.

It was Larkin, and the worried lines in his face were swept away by a quick, cheery smile as he bent over the bed and pressed McGee's right hand in a manner that spoke more than words.

"What happened, Buzz?" McGee asked, and was again surprised at the thin quality of his voice.

"You're all right, old hoss," Larkin evaded, "but you mustn't talk yet. Be quiet now. To-morrow night I'll be back and tell you all about it."

"But—"

"Quiet now! See you to-morrow," and with another squeeze of the hand he was gone.

Well, McGee thought, it was rather tiring to try to think. Sleep was so easy—and so soft.

2

The following evening Larkin came back again, just as the nurse had finished giving McGee a light, liquid meal.

"Hello, you little shrimp!" he sang out cheerily. "Eyes bright and everything! Old Saw Bones just told me I could see you for five minutes—but to do

all the talking. You can have three questions only."

A thin, tired smile came to McGee's freckled face, a face almost hidden under the bandages that completely covered his head.

"All right," he said. "First question—will I fly again?"

"Of course! In four or five weeks you'll be good as new."

"Four or five weeks! What—"

"Careful now, or you'll use up all your questions. When you set that Camel down in a shell hole she flipped over and your head was slightly softer than a big rock that happened to be handy. I would have bet on the rock being softest, but it seems I'd lost. You went blotto. A bunch of soldiers dragged you out from under what was left of that Camel—which wasn't much. Then an ambulance brought you back here. This hospital is about five kilos from squadron headquarters, and I've been back here twice a day for the past five days, worrying my head off for fear you'd never come to."

"Five days?" Red responded, his voice indicating his disbelief.

"Yep, five days. Three days passed before you even opened your eyes. Try and land on your feet, next time."

"The nurse tells me my left arm is broken," McGee said. "Wonder how I got that?"

"You've used up all your questions," Larkin told him, laughing, "and I've used up all my time. I want to be good so that Old Saw Bones will let me see you to-morrow night."

"Wait," McGee began, but the nurse interposed herself.

"No more to-night," she said. "In a day or two you can talk as much as you like."

The next two or three days passed slowly for McGee. Each night Larkin came back from squadron headquarters in a motor cycle side car, but his stays were so brief that Red had no chance to get any but the most fragmentary news.

As for news from the front, he could drag nothing from the nurses or from Larkin, and when he inquired after members of the squadron Buzz would reply with an evasive, "Oh, they're all right," and shift the conversation into the most commonplace channels.

Ten days of this, and the surgeon gave his O. K. to the use of a wheel chair, which was pushed around the grounds by one of the hospital orderlies. The grounds were extremely beautiful, the hospital having been a famous resort hotel before the exigencies of warfare required its conversion into one of the thousands of hospitals scattered throughout France.

Great beech and chestnut trees covered the lawn, and to one side was a miniature lake, centered by a

sparkling fountain, on whose wind-dimpled surface graceful, proud swans moved with a stately ease that scorned haste or show of effort.

On the second day of exploration in the wheel chair, Larkin came in the afternoon and, relieving the orderly, pushed Red's chair down to a deep shaded spot by the side of the pond.

"I can't see why they won't let me walk around," McGee complained. "There's nothing wrong with my legs."

"No, but they're not so sure about that head, yet. Another few days and you'll be running foot races," Larkin assured him.

"How long does it take a broken arm to heal, Buzz?"

"Two or three weeks—maybe four. You had a bad break. Maybe a little longer. You're lucky, after all—maybe."

"What do you mean, lucky?" Red looked at him quizzically.

"Well, some of the boys haven't gotten off so easy."

"See here, Buzz, I'm tired of snatches of news. Tell me all you know about—about everything. Back here the war seems so far away—and unreal. Except for all these wounded men, and the uniforms, I'd never think of it. No guns, no action, no—no dawn patrols. I feel like a fish out of water. But there

must be some little old war going on up there. I've heard about Chateau-Thierry, by piecemeal. Boy! It was the big show starting the very morning I got it, and we didn't even know it. Just my luck to get forced down at a time like that!"

"Maybe not so tough," Buzz answered. "A Blighty, if it doesn't cripple, is not so bad. Our casualties have been nearly forty per cent, from one cause or another."

"No!" Red exclaimed in surprise.

Larkin nodded, dourly. "They sure have! We've been up against von Herzmann's Circus most of the time, and that fellow hasn't any slouches on his roster. That was one of his outfit that cracked your engine."

"Really? Did you get him?" Red asked, his face alight with interest.

Larkin shook his head. "No luck. I ducked to follow you. But Fouche got him—his first that morning."

"That morning? You mean he—"

"Got another one, a flamer, just back of Chateau-Thierry. That boy is some flyer! He's an ace already."

McGee's delight was genuine. "That's great! Never can tell, can you? I didn't think much of his work." He hesitated, wanting to inquire about the others but held back by that statement of Larkin's

to the effect that casualties were above forty per cent. He feared he would ask about someone whose name was now enrolled in that sickening total.

"What about—Yancey?" he tried.

Larkin laughed. "Oh, that Texas cyclone is as wild as a range horse and is due to get potted any minute. In fact, he's overdue. He's a balloon busting fool, and no one can stop him. He has nine of them to his credit and every time he goes out he comes back with his plane in shreds and just barely holding together. You'd think it would cure him, but he eats shrapnel. Has two planes to his credit, but he doesn't go in for planes. He cuts formation exactly like you used to, Shrimp, and goes off high, wide and lonesome, looking for sausages. He got one just this morning, and I give you my word his ship looked like a sieve when he came in. The Major threatens to ground him if he doesn't quit cutting formation, but he's only bluffing. He's as proud as the rest of us."

"So Cowan is all right?" Red asked.

"He sure is *all right*," Larkin enthused. "He's an intolerable old fuss budget and hard to get along with when on the ground or out of action, but he's square, he's developed into a real commander, and he's got sand a-plenty. He's coming down to see you to-morrow—and that's going some for Cowan. He likes you a lot."

Red colored, and to change the subject, asked, "What about Hampden? Didn't I see him go down just before I caught it?"

"Yes. Flamer. Poor devil!"

To Red's mind came the picture of Siddons, fleeing from the field of action a few minutes before the tragic death of the only man in the squadron who really called him friend. Friend, indeed!

"I suppose Siddons is still on top," McGee said, somewhat bitterly. "His kind never get it."

A troubled look spread over Larkin's face. "You know," he began slowly, "none of us can figure out that fellow. He didn't get back to the squadron that day until just at dark. The news of Hampden's death seemed to daze him, but he didn't say a word. Two days later he left the squadron, and we thought he was gone for good—grounded for keeps or sent home. But yesterday he turned up again, big as life. If Cowan is displeased, he doesn't show it. We can't figure it out."

"I can!" McGee flared, then suddenly remembered that Cowan had charged him with absolute secrecy concerning the discoveries he had made.

"Well then, what's the dope?" Larkin asked.

"Oh, he's got a heavy drag somewhere," Red replied, remembering that he had passed his word to Major Cowan. "What about Hank Porter?" he asked, to shift the subject.

Larkin shook his head, dismally. "Another one of Herzmann's Circus filled him full of lead, but he tooled his ship back home before he fainted from loss of blood. He's in a hospital for the rest of the war. May never walk again."

McGee decided to do no more roll calling for the day. It was altogether too depressing. For a while they talked of lighter, commonplace things and then fell into that understanding silence that is possible only with those whose friendship is so firmly fixed that words add little to their communion.

Watching the swans that moved around the central fountain in stately procession, McGee fell to thinking how little those lovely creatures knew of tragedy and sorrow. Theirs was a world secure in beauty, unmarred by the things which man brings upon himself, and this was true because they knew nothing of avarice or grasping greed. Could it be that man, in all his pride, was one of the least sensible of God's creatures?

3

The day following, Major Cowan called, and in his elation over the success of American arms at the recent battle of Chateau-Thierry, told McGee more in a short half hour than Red had been able to worm from all others with whom he talked.

The Germans, Cowan told him, had been stopped at Chateau-Thierry in an epic stand made by the 2nd and 3rd Divisions, A. E. F., and a few days later the Marines had crowned themselves with a new glory when, in liaison with the French, they had stormed the edges of Belleau Wood, gained a foothold, and then tenaciously pushed slowly forward in the bloodiest and bitterest battle yet waged by the untried American forces. Counter-attack after counter-attack had been met and repulsed, with the net result that the Germans had been definitely stopped in the Marne salient. Their hope of breaking through to Paris was shattered, and though they were still pounding hard, their sacrifices were vain.

It was, Cowan declared, the real turning point of the war, and even now men were joyously declaring that the war would be won by Christmas.

As for the air forces, they had delivered beyond the fondest hopes of the high command. The casualties had been high, Cowan admitted, but not higher than might be expected and not without giving even heavier losses to the enemy. The squadron losses could have been held down had the members been less keen about scoring a personal victory over von Herzmann. Every pursuit pilot along the entire front was willing to take the most desperate chances in the hope of plucking the crest feathers of this German war eagle.

"I guess there's one member not particularly anx-

ious to pluck any of the eagle's feathers," McGee put in at this point.

"No?" Cowan's voice was quizzical. "Who's that?"

"Siddons," McGee replied tersely.

A look of aggravation, or of pained tolerance, crossed Cowan's face.

"We won't discuss that," he said, deserting for the moment his air of good-fellowship and returning to the quick, testy manner of speaking which was so characteristic of him in matters of decision. "I take it you have said nothing to Larkin, or anyone else, concerning your—ah, our suspicions?"

"Nothing, sir. But I can't—"

"Good. Let Intelligence work it out, Lieutenant. One little rumor might upset all their plans. I can assure you, however, that G 2 knows all that you know. They are waiting the right minute—and perhaps have some plan in mind. Silence and secrecy are their watchwords. Let them be yours." He arose and extended his hand. "I must be moving along. I'm glad to see you doing so nicely. You'll be more than welcome when you get back to the squadron. Don't worry. There's plenty of war left yet."

4

Perhaps there was plenty of war left, but McGee

soon discovered that a badly broken arm and a cracked, cut head can be painfully slow in healing. Days dragged slowly by, with Larkin's visits as the only bright spot in the enforced inactivity. Then, to McGee's further distress, the squadron was moved to another front. Larkin had been unable to tell him just where they were going, but believed it was to the eastward, where it was rumored the Americans were to be given a purely American sector.

This was unpleasant news to McGee. It meant that he would be left behind, and he could not drag from the hospital medicoes any guess as to when he would be permitted to leave the hospital.

Hospital life, with its endless waiting, sapped his enthusiasm. At night, in the wards, the men recovering from all manner of wounds would try to speed the lagging hours by telling stories, singing songs, and inventing the wildest of rumors. Occasionally, when the lights were out, some wag would begin an imitation of a machine gun, with its rat-tat-tat-tat, and another, catching the spirit of the mimic warfare, would make the whistling sound of a high angle shell. In a few moments the ward would be a clamorous inferno of mimic battle sounds—machine guns popping, shells screaming toward explosion, cries of gas, and the simulated agonized wails of the wounded and dying.

"Hit the dirt! Here comes a G. I. can."

"Look out for that flying pig!"

"Over the top, my buckoes, and give 'em the bayonet."

Thus did men, wrecks in the path of war, keep alive their spirit and courage by jesting over the grimest tragedy that had ever entered their lives. And then they would take up rollicking marching songs, or sing dolefully, "I wanta go home, I wanta go home."

Invariably, when some chap began a narrative of the prowess of his own company or regiment, the others would begin singing, tauntingly:

"The old grey mare she ain't
what she used to be,
She ain't what she used to be,
Ain't what she used to be.
The old grey mare she ain't
what she used to be
Many years ago. . . . ."

It wasn't really fun, it was only the pitifully weak effort to meet suffering, loneliness, homesickness and fear with bravado.

There is no one in all the world more lonely than a soldier in a hospital. Time becomes what it really is, endless, and without hope of a change on the morrow.

And the pay for it all was a gold wound chevron to wear on the sleeve, or a dangling, glittering medal testifying to courage and sacrifice!

CHAPTER XI

The Ace and the Spy

1

So slow was McGee's recovery that it was the middle of September before he received his final discharge from the hospital and was given orders to rejoin his old squadron, now operating in the St. Mihiel salient. Three days prior to his release the American Army, operating on a purely American front, had attacked the Germans in the St. Mihiel salient with such determined vigor, and the entire preparation conducted with such successful secrecy, as to take the Germans by complete surprise, overrun all opposition and recover for France many miles of territory long held by the invaders. Thousands of prisoners, and arms of all calibre, were captured in the swift stroke, and all France was ringing with praise of the endeavor.

News of the progress of the battle reached McGee just before his final discharge. He entertained high hopes of rejoining the squadron in time to participate in the feast of victory, but by the 15th, three days after the battle was begun, the salient had been pinched out and the battle won.

On the 16th, when McGee reached Ligny-en-Barrois, which had served as General Pershing's field headquarters at the beginning of the operation, he found that his squadron had been withdrawn from the sector and sent somewhere else.

Where? No one seemed to know. Furthermore, no one seemed to care a great deal. A pilot lost from his squadron, or a soldier lost from his regiment, was no new thing in France. It happened daily. Men were discharged from hospitals, ordered to a certain point to rejoin their commands, only to discover on reaching there that the outfit had seemingly vanished in thin air.

McGee spent a full day trying to find someone with the correct information as to the location of the squadron.

At last an officer on the General Staff looked over McGee's papers and gave him a transportation order to a little town west and south of Verdun.

"Is my squadron there, sir?" McGee asked.

"They should be," the officer replied. "At least near there," and he closed the conversation as though that were quite enough for any pilot to know.

But when McGee reached the town, part of the journey being by rail and part by motor lorries, he found himself as completely lost as possible. Again no one seemed to know anything about the squadron. His search was made doubly difficult by the fact that

there was an unusual air of activity; all the troops seemed to be on the move, and officers were far too busy with their own cares to listen to the troubles of a lost aviator.

That night McGee watched two or three regiments pass through the town, fully equipped for battle. It came to him, suddenly, that all this activity and night marching could mean only one thing—a new attack along some new front. Encouraged by the success of St. Mihiel, the Americans were going in again. But where? McGee put the question to a dozen officers, and not one of them had the foggiest notion of where he was going.

This served all the more to convince McGee that a new operation was being secretly planned by Great Headquarters, and from the many different divisional insignias which he had noticed, he felt convinced that it would be a major offensive. Regiment after regiment of soldiers marched through the little village; then came lumbering guns and caissons clattering over the resounding cobblestones of the street. Battery after battery passed by. They were followed by a long train of motor transports; then came some hospital units with their motor ambulances; then more infantrymen, singing and joking as they swung along in the darkness.

Watching them, McGee was suddenly seized with an idea which no amount of logical thinking could ex-

clude from his mind. Where these troops were going, there he would find action. Somewhere, between this point and their final stopping place, the trenches, he would find some unit of the air force. The army must have its eyes, and any member of any air unit could tell him more than he could learn here.

The spirit of this new type of adventure moved him to action. He had often wondered about the life of the doughboy. Now, for the night, he would fall in and march along with them. It would be fun just to be going along, answerable to no one and making his way forward on foot, by hooked rides, or by whatever means that presented itself and seemed attractive.

Slinging his musette bag over his shoulder, and buttoning up his flying coat, he stepped into the street, followed along the dark buildings for a few yards and then fell in alongside a long line of infantrymen.

A mile beyond the edge of the town he regretted his action. Rain began to fall in torrents. Ponchos were quickly donned by the men and they again took up the splashing, sloshing line of march, grumbling a little, joking about "Sunny France," and complaining over the harsh order that forbade smoking.

From that one thing McGee knew for a certainty that they were being sent forward under orders of the utmost secrecy. Men on the line of march under cover of darkness were never allowed to smoke. An

enemy airman, should he pass over, would see a long line of twinkling fireflies. From that he would know there was some sort of movement, and this information would be speedily carried to the German High Command. So, without displaying any lights whatsoever, the men and motors moved ever forward along the muddy road.

The rain ceased as suddenly as it had come. The night was warm, for September, and grey fog wraiths began rising from the ground. The sweating horses, straining at the big heavy guns at the side of the road, were blanketed in steam.

The traffic on the pitch black road was becoming increasingly heavy, and now and again halts were made until someone, far ahead, succeeded in working out the snarl. Then the troops would move forward again.

McGee no longer had any doubts concerning what was in store for these thousands upon thousands of men, but he was beginning to question the wisdom of his own move. He made no attempt to engage anyone in conversation, fearing that it would result in some officious commander ordering him to the rear.

Far ahead, against the black night sky, flashes of gunfire showed now and then, the following thunder establishing the fact that the front was within three or four hours' marching time. The gunfire, however, was not heavy, being merely the spasmodic firing in-

cident to such nights as communiques spoke of as "calm."

After another hour of marching, McGee noticed that they were on the edge of a shattered village. Not one single wall stood intact. As he reached the center of this stark skeleton of a once happy village he saw that here the enemy had concentrated their fire. Here was a wall, standing gaunt and grim against the night sky; and over there, facing a little square, a shattered church still retained the strength to hold aloft its cross-capped steeple. The Cross . . . . in a broken, blood-red world!

McGee slowed his pace, gradually, and dropped from the line of march. He had considered himself fully recovered, but the last hour had sapped his small reserve of strength. He seated himself on a pile of stone in the dark corner of a protecting wall and wiped his brow. What with the long, hot march, and the steam arising from the soaked earth, he was wringing wet. The experience had served to increase his respect for these plodding doughboys who considered this as only one more night like dozens of others they had experienced.

Sitting there on the damp, cold stone, McGee considered his position. This town, battered by shell fire, would be forward of any position taken up by a pursuit group. To push on would be but to retrace his steps. It would also be folly, for he had no gas

mask. Shells had reached this town before, and they might do so again. He was willing to take a chance with flying shrapnel, but deadly gas was something else again.

He decided, therefore, to make his way to the edge of the town, find shelter if possible, and await the coming of dawn. Daylight, he reasoned, would be certain to bring him in sight of planes from some group, operating on this front, and if he could locate a 'drome his problem would be near solution.

He made his way back along the lines of infantrymen, artillery, ambulances and wagon trains until he reached an old stone stable that had miraculously escaped destruction.

Having no light, he groped around in the black interior, seeking a place where he might spread his coat for a bed. He stumbled against a ladder, which mounted upward into the cavernous mow of a loft. He climbed the creaking rungs, found footing on the dry floor, and stopped to sniff at the odor of the few wisps of dry, musty hay scattered thinly over the rough boards. He took a step forward, stumbled over a pair of legs and landed headfirst on the stomach of another sleeper.

"Whoosh!" went the escaping breath of that truant soldier, followed by an angry outpouring of abuse.

"Say, soldier! Get your foot out of my face! What do you think this is—a football game?"

"Pipe down!" came a gruff voice from another corner. "Do you want some smart Looie to come up here and chase us out?"

McGee smiled, wondering what would be their reaction should he announce that "a Looie" was even now in their presence. Perhaps it was his duty, as an officer, to rout them out and order them to rejoin their commands, but he felt no responsibility for these men of the line, and if they were as weary and sleepy as he—and doubtless they had more reason to be—then he could hardly blame them for falling out. With the morning, he knew, these army-wise soldiers would go down the road until they found their outfits and there pour forth a plausible lie about becoming lost in the tangle and how they had searched all night for their company.

McGee knew little enough about the American infantrymen, but he did know that "for tricks that are vain" Bret Harte's famous heathen Chinee had nothing on the average soldier of the line, be he American, English, French or a black man from Senegal.

Cautiously he felt out a clear space, spread his coat over the rough timbers and was soon sound asleep.

2

While McGee slept soundly, blissfully removed

from all scenes of conflict and completely ignorant of his exact location, a midnight conference of gravest nature was taking place in the little settlement of Landres-et-St. Georges, far behind the German lines of defense.

Four thick-necked, grey-haired German officers were seated at a long table in the front room of a chateau that had been in German hands for more than three years. Candles flickered uncertainly on the table, lighting the center of the large room but leaving the corners in dim shadows.

The four officers sat stiffly erect, without comment, their eyes on the double door as though they were awaiting someone. Outside, on the stone flagging of a courtyard, sounded the heavy tread of a Prussian Guardsman walking guard before the sanctum of these "Most High" ones who sat so stolidly waiting.

The resounding footfalls of the guardsman came to a clicking halt, followed by a guttural challenge which was replied to in a softer voice. The guardsman again took up his beat.

A moment later the door to the council room opened. A smooth-faced, blond young man stood at stiff salute in the doorway—dressed in the uniform of an English officer!

For a long minute he stood at salute while the four at the table eyed him studiously. Then the hand came down, and a quick smile spread over his face

as he stepped forward into the brighter light of the room. He carried in his hand one of the swagger sticks so commonly used by English officers.

"Well, *Herr Hauptmann,*" he addressed the officer at the head of the table, "do you find my disguise, and my English, sufficiently correct?"

"Correct, yes," the heavy-jowled officer replied in German, "but not pleasing, Count von Herzmann. *Himmel!* How I hate the sight of the Englander's uniform and the sound of his thin, squeaky tongue. And I say to you again that this wild plan of yours is a fool's errand. I would forbid it, had you not gained the consent of the General Staff. I do not understand it. You are too valuable to the cause for the General Staff to permit you to take such a chance. I say again, it is a fool's errand."

Count von Herzmann smiled reassuringly. "Fool's errand, *Herr Hauptmann?*" he responded in German. "Is there anything more precious to our cause than to learn just now where this next blow is to be struck? For the past ten days all of our secret operatives have sent us conflicting reports. The English and the French are too quiet on their fronts. It presages a storm. As for the Americans, we need not worry. They are still boasting of their victory at St. Mihiel. They will not be ready to strike again before late Fall—perhaps not until Spring. We must—"

"Speak in English," interrupted one of the other

officers. "Much as we hate it, we must see to it that it is perfect."

"Right you are!" von Herzmann replied with the perfect accent of a well-bred Englishman. "My three years' schooling in England was not for nothing, sir. Accent top hole, eh, what! Rawther." He smiled at his own mimicry. "I was saying," he went on, "that we must discover where the English will strike next. Victory depends upon it."

"*Ja, das ist richtig,*" spoke up the stolid *Oberstleutnant,* who had been listening without comment as his grey eyes, deep set under stiff, bristling eyebrows, appraised the confident von Herzmann. "*Ja,* we must learn where the swine strike next. But must it be you to take the chance? You know the cost—should you fail?"

"Quite well, sir," von Herzmann replied, smiling. "A little party in front of a firing wall with myself as the center of attraction. Ah, well! What matter. I have about played out my string of luck in the air. Sooner or later, there must be an ending. I have a great fear that it will be the luck of some cub, fresh at the front, to bring me down. Ha! How he would swank around, boasting how he brought down the great von Herzmann. Bah! Death, *Herr Hauptmann,* I do not fear in the least, but I hate the thought of a cub boasting over my bones. Besides, there are no new adventures left for me in the air.

I am a little weary of it all. But this—this is new adventure and—"

"And deadly dangerous," reminded the cadaverous, thin-faced officer at the far end of the table.

"If not dangerous, it is not adventure, sir," von Herzmann replied. "Do we not all enjoy the thing that presents some hazard? Youth lives it; age thrills to the reports of it. If I fail, I fail. If I succeed, the Fatherland is well served and I've another adventure in my kit. Perhaps even another bit of iron to dangle on my coat, eh? Rawther jolly prospect, what?" He again smiled at his own mimicry, as well he might, for the accent was perfect. "But I won't fail, *Herr Hauptmann.*" He became serious as he drew some papers from the breast pocket of his well tailored, though well worn, English uniform coat which bore the marks of campaigning. "See," he said, tossing down a little black fold which the English issued to officers for identification, "I am Lieutenant Richard Larkin, R. F. C., known to his familiars as 'Buzz.' The picture, you will notice, is my own, placed there after we had carefully removed the one of the gentleman whose uniform and identification card I am to make use of.

"This," he tossed another paper on the table, "is a pass to Paris, properly indorsed, and giving authority for refueling and repairing, if needed. Neat enough, eh? The date, unfortunately, was originally

in April, but our Intelligence section has some very clever penmen and you will note that the date now appearing there is as of September the twenty-sixth, and the period of the pass is for five days."

"The twenty-sixth!" exclaimed the *Oberst-leutnant*. "So soon! That is the day after to-morrow."

"Yes. Our operative will cross the lines to-morrow evening, just before sundown, in a two-seater Nieuport. He will land just back of Montfaucon, and I will then re-cross the lines, will be set down back of Neuvilly and will then begin the great adventure. I am to be back within five days, or—" he shrugged his shoulder expressively.

One of the officers banged his fist on the table. "It is a fool's errand, I repeat, a fool's errand! If this operative, with the Americans, is back of Neuvilly, what is he doing there? Perhaps the Americans are there in force, preparing to strike here."

"Impossible!" the senior officer snorted. "Attack the Hindenburg Line? The Americans are stupid, but not so stupid as that. We know that a few Americans are in the sector south of Vauquois Hill. They are relieving the French there. And for what reason? So that the French may be moved up in the Champagne, east of the Meuse. That is where the blow will be struck. But, even so, I have not the faith in this Operative Number Eighty-one which the High Command seems to place in him."

"He has brought us much information," one of the others reminded.

"Yes, erroneous and tardy information. Not one thing have we learned from him but what was too late to be of value. And much of it inaccurate."

"Not always," von Herzmann replied. "He brought correct and timely information concerning the movement of that new American pursuit squadron, you will recall. And but for the accursed luck that brought those French Spads upon us at the wrong time, my Circus would have potted half of them."

"Luck!" the senior officer retorted, heatedly. "You call it luck! It was luck that we did not lose you and that you got your crippled plane back across the line. But can you be sure that those Spads came upon the scene, at the right moment, by chance?"

Count von Herzmann shook his head. "No, *Herr Hauptmann,* in this war we can be sure of only one thing—death, if the war continues. It must be brought to a speedy close. Daily, now, we lose ground. It is because of this that I made the urgent request to be permitted to undertake this mission. But," he smiled expansively, "be not too fearful or alarmed. If I fail, if there be trickery in it, you shall have the privilege of avenging me."

"How do you mean, avenge you?"

"*Herr Hauptmann,* war is a world-old game, with modern applications. You have read, doubt-

less, how in the olden times hostages were held?"

"Yes, but—"

"It is not always effective, but it furnishes the crumb of revenge and retaliation. I am not without some fear for my safety, and because of that I will provide a hostage."

"You talk in riddles."

"Perhaps, but I give you the answer. Operative Number Eighty-one will come for me in a two-seater just at dark. But he will not be the one to take me back."

"*Ach! Himmel!*"

"*Das ist ziemlich gefcheit!*"

Count von Herzmann shrugged his shoulders at the exclamatory surprise and compliment. "Clever? No. Merely an old custom borrowed from old wars. Operative Number Eighty-one will be held at the headquarters at Montfaucon—pending my return. If I do not return in five days, then he too will hold the stage a brief minute before a firing wall. Then, perhaps we will meet beyond the Great Line—where there are no wars or rumors of wars. Is there anything else you have to take up with me now, *Herr Hauptmann?*"

"*Ach*, yes! If you are successful, and return within your scheduled time, how will this operative, held at Montfaucon, make a satisfactory explanation to the Americans regarding his long absence?"

Count von Herzmann snapped his fingers. "Poof! That is secondary, and a problem which I leave to the superior mind of *Herr Hauptmann*—and the High Command."

CHAPTER XII

Wheels Within Wheels

1

NEAR noon, the following day, a motor cycle with side car snorted to a sudden stop at the newly erected hangar tents of an American Pursuit Group, and McGee crawled stiffly from the bone-racking, muscle-twisting "bath tub." He thanked the mud-splashed, goggled driver, adding, by way of left-handed compliment, that he had been given more thrills in the last five kilometers than he had received in all his months in the Allied Air Service.

He turned toward the hangar. There was but one ship on the field, a two-seater. By its side stood Siddons and his air mechanic. They seemed to be in close-headed conference.

McGee clicked his teeth in a little sound of suppressed emotion, slipped through the hangar door and stood face to face with his own old Ack Emma.

"For the luva Pete!" exclaimed the startled air mechanic. "When did you get here, Lieutenant?"

McGee extended his hand in greeting. Williams grasped it, eagerly.

"Well, for the luva Pete?" he repeated, lacking words in his surprise and pleasure. "Lieutenant Larkin! Oh, Lieutenant Larkin!" he began roaring. "Oh, Bill! Where's Larkin?"

"Just left a minute ago," came a voice from under the hood of a new Spad. "Went over to his quarters to wash up. Grease from head to foot."

"I'll go show you his quarters," Williams said, eagerly.

"Never mind, I'll find him," McGee said. "Have to check in at headquarters first. I hear Cowan is still C. O."

"Yes, sir. He sure is. And he's a darb, Lieutenant."

"So I hear. Piling up quite a record. How many of the old gang still here, Williams?"

"Not many. If the Hun doesn't get 'em, nerves and the smell of castor-oil does. Half a dozen of 'em gone flooey in the stomach. Couldn't eat enough to keep a bird alive and couldn't keep that down. It's a tough game, Lieutenant. Next war that comes yours truly is going to join the infantry."

"Don't do it," McGee warned, as he turned away. "I've just had a little experience with the infantry and it's not such a bed of roses. See you later, Williams."

"Well for the luva Pete!" Williams commented to himself, standing arms akimbo as he watched McGee

cross over toward headquarters. "And they said that bird's head was busted wide open and his brains scattered all over France. Now there he is, big as life. I'll bet ten bucks to a lousy centime he lives to fall off a merry-go-round and break his neck. For the luva Pete!"

2

McGee's return to the squadron would have been fittingly celebrated but for the fact that five o'clock the following morning had been designated as "zero hour" for the greatest drive ever undertaken by Americans on foreign soil. He had arrived just in time to hurl himself into the feverish preparations for the support which all air units must give the massed ground forces that would hurl themselves upon the supposedly impregnable Hindenburg Line. With the coming of dawn the combat squadrons must gain and hold air supremacy. Nothing less than complete and absolute supremacy would satisfy Great Headquarters, who in planning the drive were high in the hope that the fresh divisions of American soldiers could break through the Hindenburg Line and by hammering, hammering, hammering at the enemy force him into peace terms before the coming of winter.

McGee was tickled pink by his timely arrival, but it was not all a matter of rejoicing. For one thing, it

seemed that almost the entire group was made up of new faces. Of those flight pilots whom he had first met when he came to the squadron as an instructor, only three remained—Yancey, Nathan Rodd and Siddons. Of course Larkin was still on top, and Cowan not only held his command, but had established quite a reputation. Yancey had earned the right to a nickname more appropriately fitting than "the flying fool," for he was anything but a fool and his mounting victories proved that he had something more than luck.

Nathan Rodd, his nerve unshattered by his first unfortunate encounter with the enemy, was still as taciturn as ever, preferring to let his deeds speak for him.

As for Siddons, McGee could get no information out of Larkin save that everyone thought that Siddons had some pull. A good flyer, yes, Larkin admitted, but forever cutting formation, flying off where he pleased, absenting himself for two or three days, and returning with the thinnest of excuses. But he got by, somehow, and Cowan was the only one who appeared friendly toward him. For the past twenty-four hours, Larkin told McGee, Siddons had been working on a two-seater and had made two test flights. No one seemed to know what was back of it, but rather believed Siddons was to be transferred to Observation, at least during the coming battle.

To this information McGee made no reply, but secretly hoped that Siddons was in fact being transferred to Observation, where his activities would be more easily accounted for due to the fact that he would be carrying an observer.

3

Late that afternoon rain began falling, and at mess time the mess hall became the stage for exceptionally spirited banter and wild conjecture as to what would happen on the morrow. Confidential battle orders carried the information that artillery preparation would begin at midnight, continuing with great concentration until 5:30 a.m., zero hour, when the attacking forces of nine American divisions would storm over the top in the beginning of a titanic struggle to carry the famous Hindenburg Line and sweep the Germans back through the Argonne and beyond the Meuse.

Every fighting unit had been given comprehensive plans of the objectives and of the ground over which they were to advance. The air units were especially drilled in the battle plans, for Great Headquarters would look to the Observation section and to the pursuit planes for a full measure of information as to how the battle went.

Major Cowan's pursuit group was only one of the

many ready to begin operations on this new front, but none could have shown more enthusiasm and eager expectancy than did this group of young men who wolfed down their evening meal and jested in a strained, light-hearted manner that betrayed the nerve tension under which they were laboring. To-morrow morning was the start of the Big Show!

All the pilots were present at this meal save Siddons, who had taken off alone, in a two-seater, a few minutes before sundown. He had let it be known that he was reporting to Observation for special duty, and no one seemed sorry to see him go.

The evening meal was scarcely finished when McGee and Larkin were forced to withdraw from the good-natured kidding match by a summons to report to Major Cowan. They obeyed, grumbling, and with heated, spirited contention that they were beyond doubt the most command-ridden lieutenants in the entire A. E. F.

"He wants to spend half the night with those maps all of us have been getting goggle-eyed over for the last two days," Larkin complained as they approached Cowan's hut. "He's a map hound, if there ever was one! I think that bird knows every trench line, strong point, pill box and artillery P. C., between here and Sedan. And so do I! He's pounded it into my head."

"I wish I knew as much," McGee quickly resigned

himself. "This drive is all so sudden and unexpected, to me, that I hardly know where I am right now. I've an idea the Old Man is going to tell me I can't go along."

"Don't worry, fellow," Larkin told him, pausing at the Major's door. "Every guy with two arms, two legs and two eyes will be along on this little fracas. Believe me, this is to be some show!"

As they entered they noticed that Cowan stood with his back to the door, bending over a large map spread out on the table.

"What did I tell you?" Larkin whispered to McGee. "We're in for a session of night map flying."

McGee did not hear him. His interest was upon a sergeant and four privates who were seated on a bench against the wall just to the right of the door. He noted that they wore side arms only, and that on their sleeves were the blue and white brassards of the Military Police. M. P., eh? Then something was up!

Cowan turned from his map. "Ah, you are here. Sergeant," he addressed the non-com in charge of the detail, "post your detail just outside the door and wait. If anyone approaches with a—ah—prisoner, admit them."

"Yes, sir." The detail filed out.

Cowan saw the look of question on the faces of the two pilots.

"You are wondering why they are here, eh? Well,

they have been sent down from Corps Headquarters to take charge of a prisoner. We hope to hold a little reception here within a short time—possibly any minute now."

"Who is to be honored, Major?" Larkin asked.

"A rather well known gentleman," Cowan replied, tantalizingly. "Both of you are quite well acquainted with Lieutenant Siddons, I believe?"

Larkin looked at McGee in astonishment.

"No, sir," McGee replied to Cowan, "no one in this outfit knows that fellow very well."

"Quite right," Cowan agreed. "Lieutenant Larkin, I recall that you lost your old R. F. C. uniform a good while back."

"Yes, sir."

"And in the pocket was your old identification fold, and certain other papers? An old pass to Paris, for one thing?"

"Why—yes, sir. The identification card was there, but I don't recall what I did with that old pass."

"It was there," Cowan told him, "and it grieves me to inform you that the uniform, and all that the pockets contained, was stolen by Lieutenant Siddons."

"What! Are you sure?"

"There is no doubt about it. Furthermore, he delivered them into the hands of the enemy."

Larkin was too dumbfounded for words, but McGee displayed little surprise.

"So you have at last found out what I knew all along, Major?" Red asked.

"Not *at last*," Cowan replied, with meaning emphasis. "Your uniform, Lieutenant Larkin, will be returned to you soon—we hope."

"Oh!" McGee jerked his head toward the door. "So that's the reason for the M. P.'s You are going to nab him?"

"Not exactly that." Cowan was enjoying the curiosity provoked by the suspense he was creating. "I believe both of you have heard of a certain German ace, Count von Herzmann?"

"*Have* we!" Larkin replied.

McGee ran his fingers along a white scar still showing through the hair which had not yet grown out long enough to be the flaming red mop of old.

"Seems I've heard of him," he said. "And I seem to recall that one of his flyers left me this little souvenir on the top of my head. I'd like to pay the Count back—in person."

"You'll never get the chance!" Cowan replied. "But if all our plans work out, you will meet him in person soon—in this very room!"

"What!" It was a duet of surprise.

"Yes, here. Count von Herzmann in person—and in Lieutenant Larkin's long lost uniform."

Both McGee and Larkin sank weakly into two convenient chairs, the expression on their faces disclosing that they were trying to select the proper order of the first of a thousand questions.

"Well—what's that to do with—with Siddons?" McGee at last found stammering tongue. "Where does he come in?"

"He comes in a few minutes after the Count. He will land the Count in a field near here, let him alight, and then take off again and proceed to this 'drome. The Count, left alone, will doubtless make his way into the woods bordering the field, where he will promptly be nabbed. That little drama should be taking place now. For your information, the credit for this coup goes to Lieutenant Siddons."

McGee and Larkin stared at each other, scarce believing their ears.

"Well what do you know about that!" McGee's half audible remark was the trite expression so commonly used by those who are staggered by a sudden revelation.

"I know *all* about it," Cowan said, actually laughing—the first time either of the others had ever heard him even so much as chuckle. "I know all about it, and I've called you here for two reasons: I think you, McGee, are entitled to see the next to the last act in this little—ah—tragedy, I suppose it should be called; and I want Larkin to be present when his

uniform reappears. I might need him for purposes of identification."

"But—"

Cowan lifted a protesting hand. "Don't ask questions. Better let me tell it. The story will have to be brief, and a bit sketchy, for time flies. The things you don't know about all this would fill a book. Perhaps I had better start at the beginning:

"In 1914, when the war first broke out, the man you know as Siddons was living in Germany, with his father and mother, and was in his second year in a Berlin university. He was born in America, of German-American parents. For your information, his right name is Schwarz, not Siddons."

"I always thought he looked like a German," McGee said.

Cowan merely nodded. "Naturally, he does. His father, who had come to America in his youth to escape four years military service with the colors, developed into an exceedingly shrewd business man and had been sent back to Germany as the Berlin representative of one of our large exporters. Though he had become an American citizen, he was, quite naturally, genuinely sympathetic with Germany as against England and France. But when it began to be almost a certainty that America would be drawn into the war, the Schwarz family held a family conference and the old man declared himself as being

loyal to America, his adopted country, if war actually came.

"During the months of strained relationship between our country and Germany, the Schwarz family had to keep their mouths shut and saw wood. Then, suddenly, America declared war. Many Americans, and German-Americans, were caught in Germany. This was the case of the Schwarz family. The old gentleman was arrested, in fact, and the military authorities claimed that since he had never served with the colors he was subject to their orders.

"Then young Schwarz—the man you know as Siddons—saw a chance to relieve the pressure and at the same time serve America in a most unusual way, a way not possible with one man in a million."

"Serve America? You mean Germany?" Larkin interjected.

"I said America," Cowan replied testily. He did not like to be interrupted. "You'd better let me tell it my way. As I was saying, Siddons, claiming to be in complete sympathy with the German cause, offered his services to them as a secret agent, unfolding a plan which they, in their alarm and need, swallowed—hook, line and sinker.

"The plan was this: He proposed that he be given instruction in secret service work and then be returned to America, where he would pose as a loyal American, get in the army, and serve as an under

cover man for Germany. They fell for it like a ton of brick, following the stupid reasoning that because of his German blood he must by nature be truly German. It may sound funny to you, but they preach that very thing, and they truly believe it.

"Well, certainly young Schwarz was cast perfectly for the role. He was widely travelled, spoke German fluently, and his English was flawless. They were quick to see the advantages. His proposition was accepted. He was given a brief schooling in their spy system, and then, for show, he was ordered out of Germany—under the fictitious name of Siddons.

"The rest was easy. We had a very poor spy system at the beginning of the war. There was no such branch of service as we now call G2. But it was forming, and to them Schwarz made his way, unfolded his plan, and after a careful checking up on his story they decided to take a chance. A spy within a spy! Wheels within wheels! It was a great idea. Do you see it?"

His two auditors made no sign other than a staring, amazed look.

"G2 was at first suspicious," Cowan went on, "but he gave them so much information concerning actual conditions in Germany that they could no longer doubt him. They sent him to an aviation training school, telling him to guard his neck at all times and not run any undue risks.

"You know the rest—or most of it. He has been invaluable to us, and to-night he will pull his greatest job. And since I have made free to tell you all this, you may be certain it is his last trip across the lines. He reports that the German High Command is getting a bit suspicious, and he dare not trust his luck much further."

McGee, who had been listening with intense interest, exhaled audibly as Cowan finished his narration. "Well!" he exclaimed. "I'll never jump to conclusions again. Now I know why that fellow has always acted like he was answerable to no one but himself. And I thought him yellow! And next I thought he was a spy. Well, I was right about that—but the wrong way around. I take my hat off to him! It takes nerve to fill his job."

"It does indeed!" Cowan agreed fervently. "Perhaps you recall how I bawled him out for cutting formation over Vitry that day when we were on our way up for our first action? And how I sent him over the lines on a mission to locate von Herzmann's Circus?"

McGee nodded. "I certainly do remember it. You sure said plenty!"

"Hokum! All hokum!" Cowan said. "Actually, he was going over on a daylight mission of an entirely different nature, and what I said in your presence was merely to mislead you. Unfortunately, you hap-

pened to see him running the Archie fire and saw the signals which he had used again and again in crossing over. When you reported to me, we feared the cat was out of the bag. There seemed to be only one way out—to pledge you to secrecy and lead you to believe that we were simply waiting for the proper time to bag him. I knew you would keep your word, and that is another reason why you are here—as a sort of reward. You are the only one who has ever had any such suspicions."

Larkin laughed, mirthlessly. "That makes a lot of chuckle-heads out of the rest of us, doesn't it?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, Lieutenant. But you did make life rather hard for Siddons. He was afraid to form close friendships. Poor Hampden was the only one he was ever very close to, and Hampden was as ignorant of the facts as any of you. Siddons had to be careful. He knows that the Germans also have spies. Should they get proof of his duplicity, he would be a doomed man."

"Well," McGee sighed again, "he can have my share of that kind of service. I prefer to meet mine without any blindfold over my eyes. I'll make my apologies to him, and admit to his face that he has more nerve than most men I know. But there is one thing I can't get through my head, Major. How could he keep fooling them if he never took them any information?"

"He did take them information. But it was always so cleverly false—just near enough the truth that he could hardly be blamed for not having it more accurate—or else it was the real truth but too late to be of any value to them. You can be sure we gained by his work."

"One more question from me, Major," Larkin spoke up. "What makes you so sure that Count von Herzmann—"

The door was thrown open by a helmeted, muddy doughboy sergeant from the lines. Then into the room, followed by the mud-spattered doughboy and the M. P. detail, walked a smiling, confident, blond young man, attired in the uniform of a member of the British Air Forces.

The suddenness and surprise of the movement started the ends of Cowan's moustache to twitching.

"Sir," spoke up the muddy infantryman, "here's that bozo we all been lookin' for."

Major Cowan arose. "Count von Herzmann, I believe?" he said as calmly as though it were a social meeting.

The prisoner lifted his eyebrows in well feigned surprise. "There is some dreadful mistake here, Major," he said with a calm assurance as he took from his pocket a small identification fold, bound in black leather. "I am—"

"Just a moment," the Major interrupted. "Permit

me first to introduce one of these gentlemen. Count von Herzmann, this is Lieutenant Richard Larkin, whose uniform you are now wearing and whose identification card you hold in your hand. I am sure you are glad to meet him."

For the briefest moment von Herzmann's mouth dropped open. He knew the jig was up! Almost immediately, however, he regained the debonair, easy grace of a splendidly poised loser. He bowed to Larkin, who stood with mouth agape and eyes popping out.

"I am indebted to Lieutenant Larkin for the use of his uniform," von Herzmann said. "I regret that it will probably be returned to him with bullet holes in it. Oh, well—such is war, eh? Perhaps he can find some satisfaction in keeping it as a souvenir. He can point to the holes and say, 'Count von Herzmann, the German ace and spy, was just behind these holes.' "

Every man in the room felt awed and a trifle uneasy. Here was a man whose cool courage they could envy. Not every man can face death with so grim a jest.

"However," von Herzmann turned to Cowan, "it gives me pleasure to report that I foresaw the possibility of this very thing and so arranged matters that a certain Mr. Schwarz, whom you call Siddons, will be shot five days from now."

"What!" Cowan stormed. He wheeled to the sergeant. "Sergeant, where did this man—"

"The sergeant doesn't know," von Herzmann put in. "He is the third man in whose charge I have been placed. Perhaps you had better let me tell you, Major. Your planes are quite wretched and inferior, sir, and when the engine of the one I was making use of died suddenly, we were forced to land quickly and take what the Fates had in store. We struck an old shell hole, turned over, and my pilot was killed, poor fellow! Too bad it wasn't the other way round. He wore his own uniform, and could hardly have been shot as a spy."

Cowan sank into a chair, rather heavily. His poise was no match for von Herzmann's, who seemed to be getting a keen delight out of the Major's discomfiture.

"I was not at the controls," von Herzmann continued, "but the engine sputtered as though it were out of fuel."

Major Cowan nodded his head sadly. "It was. Poor Siddons was right," he mused, seemingly unconscious for the moment of the presence of the others.

"Only half right," von Herzmann corrected, smiling.

"No," Cowan replied with spirit, "*all* right. He feared you might become suspicious and double-cross him, and with that in mind he put just enough gas in

the tank to carry the plane there and part way back. He made rather careful tests. But he installed another tank, with a feed line that he could cut in—*in case he were flying the plane.* If not—well, you see what happened."

Count von Herzmann merely shrugged his shoulders at this piece of news which must have been irritating in the extreme. "Ah, well," he said easily, "one cannot think of everything. In our haste to get away, neither I nor my pilot thought of that possibility. Very clever fellow, this man Schwarz. We both made good guesses, and we both lose. Kismet! We both serve our country, and we both get shot. So be it. Wars are very old, Major; death quite as common as life; and the old Hebraic law still operative—'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth!' In this case, an ace for an ace and a spy for a spy. Even up, and the war rolls on. I wonder, Major, just when it will close?"

Seemingly, as in answer to his question, from toward the front came the sudden roaring of thousands of guns. Doors rattled, the ground quivered, and through the window the sky was alight with a pulsating red-white glare.

For a few minutes every man in the room stood listening.

"What is—that?" Count von Herzmann asked at last.

"The beginning of the end," Cowan answered. "You wondered when it would come. Soon now. Nearly five thousand heavy calibre guns are blowing your trenches to bits, and will continue until we go over in the morning."

"So?" The German's face was a picture of pained surprise. "So the attack comes here? Gott! Had I known—had *we* known." He paused, obviously pained, then again resumed his jesting poise. "You can be sure, Major, that I regret I am not on the receiving end of your artillery preparation and that I shall be unable to meet your squadron with my Circus to-morrow morning over the lines."

"I dare say," was Cowan's reply as he turned to the sergeant in charge of the Military Police detail. "Sergeant, take charge of the prisoner and deliver him to First Corps Headquarters. And make sure that he does not escape."

The sergeant saluted, grinning expansively.

"He's got a fat chance to get away from *me*, sir," he said. "I'm the spy bustin'est baby in this man's army."

"You will treat him with courtesy," Cowan ordered. "He is a brave man."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant replied. "So was Nathan Hale, sir—but he got shot just the same."

CHAPTER XIII

The Last of the Big Shows

1

The following morning had no dawning. A light rain had fallen during the night and a heavy, obliterating fog arose from the wet earth, blanketing hill and valley alike. So dense was it that troops in the front lines, peeping over the top in anxious nervousness as they awaited the zero hour, saw nothing but a wall of white that made the shell-tortured land before them more mysterious than any dream of battle ever fancied.

What did it hold? Where were the German lines? And just what had been the effect of this five hour tornado of screaming shells?

Machine guns, under cover of the fog, were boldly mounted on the trench parapets. They danced and chattered on their tripods as they pounded forth streams of lead upon the unseen enemy positions.

Zero hour at last! Along the line officers blew shrill whistles, or some, calmer than the others, gave the signal with a confidently shouted, "Let's go!"

Over the trench tops poured thousands of khaki

clad warriors, sallying forth in the most resolute endeavor ever attempted by American troops.

They had not advanced ten feet from the trenches before the fog swallowed them, magically, and many were never to retrace their steps. The big show they had so long waited for was here with an ear-splitting, nerve-racking tempest of thundering guns. The Big Parade!

2

At any other time the air forces would have stayed safely at home, not daring to take wing on such a day when the ceiling was scarcely higher than a man's head. But now they must go out, at any cost, blindly flying and vainly seeking some view of the advancing troops. But they went out singly, for to attempt formation flight on such a morning would be to court disaster and death.

McGee and Larkin were the first of the squadron to take off for the front, the interval between their time of departure being sufficient to avoid any meeting as they climbed.

The fog bank was much thicker than McGee had anticipated. At a hundred feet he could not see a thing above, below, or on either side. He headed his new ship, a swift Spad, in the direction of Vauquois Hill, intending to cross the line there and hoping that

the crest of the hill might loom up out of the fog.

Vain hope. It was impossible to see a thing. Any minute he might go plowing into some hillside or foul his landing gear in the tops of trees. It was eerie business, this flying by instinct and facing the dreaded possibility of coming a cropper.

Several times he cut his motor, and at such times could hear the din of battle below—and it was not any too *far* below, either.

Added to the fear of crashing was the thought that any second he might cross the path of a high angle shell which had been directed at some enemy strong point. It was not a pleasant thought, but he could not shake it off. Certainly the air was full of them, and if he was to get any information as to the progress of the battle he must keep low and accept all hazards. Then too, there was the chance that he might meet up with some other plane drilling through the fog.

"Well," he thought aloud, "I'm a poor prune if I lose my nerve now. I expressed my opinion of Siddons—and gee! how he'd like to be facing no more than this."

It was a depressing, angering thought. Five days, von Herzmann had said. Then Siddons would face a firing squad. In the meantime, there was no human agency, on the Allied side of the line, that could stop the inexorable march of time and the certain death which this man must meet.

It was this latter fact, the feeling of helpless impotency, that fired McGee's brain with reckless daring and sent him boring through the fog like an angry hornet.

He soon found that this was of no avail and at last, seeking something that might be of value, he climbed out of the earth-blanketing fog into the clear sunlight, encountering clear blue sky at some fifteen hundred feet.

Below him, now, was a billowing sea of fog banks, tinted by the sun which had climbed about it. A short distance ahead he sighted an enemy tri-plane Fokker, but before he could give chase it had dived into the fog.

Over to the right, in what he thought must be the general direction of Montfaucon, he saw a single seater Nieuport cruising around.

He headed for it, and soon identified it as Yancey's plane. The wild Texan was sitting above the fog, patiently waiting (as a cat waits for a mouse) for some observation sausage to come nosing out of the fog. Tex knew that the sun would eventually burn up the fog. The enemy, also knowing this, would be sending up their sausages so as to have them in position when the fog passed. Certainly the enemy had reason to see all that could be seen, for by this time they must be hard pressed indeed.

Directly in McGee's path, about half way between

his plane and Yancey's, a black, formless bulk loomed out of the fog. A sausage!

McGee drove hard for it, and noted that he was in a race with Yancey, whose quick eye had sighted it.

The black bag was hardly out of the fog bank when tracers from McGee's and Yancey's guns began streaming into it. It exploded with amazing suddenness, the flaming cloth sinking back into enveloping billows of fog.

Yancey banked sharply, flew alongside McGee and shook his fist as though to say—"Go and find a rat hole of your own. This is my territory."

McGee chuckled. The Texan, instead of trying to catch some view of the far flung battle lines, was out to increase his score.

McGee dived back down into the fog, hoping that it might be lifting. Down below, he knew, a mighty struggle was on. Lines of communication would be shot all to pieces in the rain of heavy shells. Great Headquarters would be waiting anxiously for some news of the real status and progress of the battle.

At 8:30 the fog was still holding over the field and McGee reluctantly turned his ship homeward.

By that sixth sense which the seasoned pilot has, or develops, he found the field. No one had been able to catch sight of the ground forces.

Cowan was storming around, under pressure from headquarters.

"It's information we want," he told the pilots as they came in, "not a tale of what can't be done. Get back over the lines. This fog will pass. This is not a job for an hour. Headquarters wants information. Get it!"

To McGee, he said, with something of a sting in his voice, "Considering the chances Siddons used to take, I'd think this squadron—his own group—would be equal to this task."

It was a lash. Furious, yet realizing the justice of the taunt, McGee again took off, determined not to come back until he could bring some real news of the battle's progress.

3

That was the longest, hardest day ever put in by American aviators. They had little trouble in gaining and holding air supremacy, but they had a most difficult time, when the fog finally lifted, in getting any accurate information.

The advance had been so rapid, and so successful, that the Hindenburg Line had been carried by the soldiers in the first few hours of battle. But in pressing forward, in the fog, they had been unable to keep in close liaison. Instead of being a well-knit whole, they were little more than a storming, victory-drunk mob. They stopped at nothing—and nothing could stop

them. As for displaying their white muslin panels to airplanes so that their positions might be known—poof! They were too busy to fool around with panels and those dizzy air birds who never did anything but fly around and look for panels. Panels be hanged! This was a day for doughboys and the bayonet!

4

That night, after mess, the members of the squadron sat around in glum silence. The success of the day, with reference to gains, was great indeed, but Cowan was riding with whip and spur. He seemed not at all pleased with the work of his own group. Added to this, word had gone around of the dramatic happenings of the previous night, with the result that Siddons, the most disliked man in the squadron, had suddenly become their mourned hero. Even now they counted him as dead, for one precious day had already slipped away and nothing in the world could save him. The success of the day seemed as nothing by the side of this tragic fact. Not the least distressing thought was the fact that they had treated him as one who had never earned the right to a full fellowship with them. And now they knew, too late, that he was a man of surpassing courage. They even learned, from Cowan, how Siddons, working with the French, had plotted trapping von Herzmann that day

when the squadron was attacked for the first time. The lucky arrival of the French Spads, they now knew, was not a matter of luck at all, but a daring plan to overwhelm the greedy German war eagle and rid the air of him. Yes, Siddons had courage and brains. There was no longer any doubt of that.

Yancey voiced the thoughts of every man present when he said: "It wouldn't be so tough if he could get it in the air. But this way—at a wall—is tough."

"What about von Herzmann?" Fouche asked. "I guess it was tough for him, too."

Yancey grinned and scratched his head. "You know," he drawled, "down in my home state, we sometimes make a mistake and slap a brand on a calf that's not really ours. Well, that's not so awful. But when somebody else makes the same mistake, it's stealin'—pure and simple. War's a lot like that. We only see one side of it, and for my part, I'm fed up with seein' that side. Boy, I hone for Texas."

5

McGee and Larkin, as flight leaders, had been called to Major Cowan's headquarters for the usual evening conference. The Major declared himself as displeased with the work of the day, but both of the young pilots, experienced in the ways of the army, realized that Cowan's displeasure was but a reaction

from pressure being put on him by the "higher ups." The General Staff, they knew, must be gratified with the success of the day, for all objectives had been taken and the enemy sorely pressed. It was true, however, that communication had been far from perfect. Liaison had broken down, and the ground gained, therefore, was the result of the grim determination of the soldier of the line to end the thing speedily rather than to a perfect coordination of all arms.

"But, Major," McGee was defending the work of the squadron by pointing out the unusual and unforeseen obstacles, "we couldn't see our wing tips until after nine o'clock, and when we could see, those doughboys wouldn't display their panels. They acted like they thought we would drop bombs on them. It's hard, Major, to get men to show white panels when they are under fire. They are afraid that the enemy will see them, too, and blow them off the face of the earth. It is always a hard problem."

"All battle problems are hard," Cowan replied. "The commanders of the troops in the line are being ridden just as we are. The General Staff feels that victory is in sight. They will accept nothing but the best of work, and we must do our full share."

"Yes, sir, of course. But I think the troops are to be congratulated for their success, and certainly this outfit was lucky in that we didn't hang any planes on

the top of Vauquois or in the woods. Four balloons and three E. A. is not such a bad record for a day like this. We held complete supremacy."

"Congratulations will be in order after a complete success, Lieutenant. Now for to-morrow—here, see this map." Larkin winked shrewdly as Cowan led them over to a detailed wall map. "The lines of departure are here. Our most advanced positions, now, as near as we can tell, are well beyond the Hindenburg Line, with the Hagen Stellung line of defense facing our troops to-morrow. Montfaucon, the enemy's strongest point, and for months headquarters for the Crown Prince, blocks the way for the 5th Corps. It is a commanding and strong position. No one knows just how strong it is."

"Pardon me," a voice came from directly behind them, "but I know a great deal about its strength."

So interested had they been, that they had not heard anyone enter. At sound of the voice they wheeled around. There stood Siddons, mud from head to foot but smiling expansively.

"Siddons!" Cowan exclaimed. "You?"

"Yes, sir—fortunately."

All three of the startled men rushed forward to wring his hand. There was a hubbub of excited talk and exclamations of surprise, with no chance for the mind to put forth logical questions. Cowan was the first to gain some degree of composure.

"Heavens, man! How did you get here?"

"Crawled, walked and ran, and the last few miles in a side car," Siddons replied. "Last night, at midnight, I was being held at Montfaucon under the trumped up pretext that a staff officer was on his way down to see me and that I was to take off with von Herzmann later in the night. But I knew that von Herzmann had taken off with another pilot, and I knew that the jig was up. They weren't accusing me of anything—as yet—but they were very quiet and their manner told me all I needed to know. Then, bing! the barrage opened up. It was some surprise. They hadn't the foggiest notion that a blow was to be struck here. Almost the first pop out of the box that long range railway rifle at Neuvilly dropped one of those big G. I. cans just outside of headquarters. There was a grand scramble for the deep dugouts. You never saw so many High Ones streaking it for safety.

"I made tracks too, but I missed the dugout door—by design! Pretty soon another big shell came along and flopped down near the same place, but by that time I was a long ways from there and going strong.

"The night was as dark as the inside of a whale, but the glare of light from the guns on our side gave me direction. The rest was comparatively easy."

"Easy!" Cowan exclaimed. "How in the world did you get across the line?"

"Major, the confusion was so great, due to that barrage, that I could have led an elephant up to the line with no one taking the time to challenge me. You forget that my German is quite good. On a dark night, well covered by a German officer's coat, which I borrowed from a chap who won't ever need it again, it was not a difficult feat. Believe me, my biggest worry was that I would get sent west by one of our own shells. When I reached the front line I crawled in a funk hole and waited for dawning and for our own troops to come along. And when they started, man! how they came! The enemy is completely disorganized, Major, and victory will be ours within a month or six weeks. Maybe sooner. The Germans know it. Montfaucon will fall to-morrow. This is the last of the big shows."

He paused, and his eyes, which McGee had always thought so cold, twinkled with merriment.

"By the way," he said, "at Division Headquarters of the 79th, where I made a report and was given transportation back here, the Intelligence Officer told me a spy was nabbed last night—a chap by the name of von Herzmann. Plane forced down, the officer told me. I wonder if it could be possible that he ran out of gas?"

"Yes," Cowan replied, catching the spirit of the banter, "he ran out of gas."

"Tut! tut!" Siddons mockingly reproved. "Wasn't that a careless thing for a great ace to do?"

THE END

GLOSSARY

Ace	One who has brought down five enemy air craft.
Ack Emma	Air Mechanic. In military service certain letters are given distinguishing sounds, such as, A is Ack, D is Don, M, to distinguish it from N, becomes Emma.
Aileron	Moveable segments of planes, which, though of small surface, control the lateral balance.
Albatross	German combat plane.
Archie	Anti-aircraft artillery fire. Probably so called because of arc of the projectile's flight.
Backwash	The wind wash caused by the propeller.
Barrel roll	A wing over acrobatic manoeuvre.
Black roses	Puffs of black smoke appearing suddenly as shell explodes high in the air.

Blighty	English slang for a wound. Generally applied to a wound serious enough to cause removal to England.
Blipped his motor	Raced; rapid advancement of throttle.
Blotto	To become unconscious.
Brass hat	A General Officer, commonly used by British soldiers.
Bucked	Encouraged, made confident.
Caisson	An ammunition wagon for mobile artillery.
Caudron	Early type of French plane. Slow and poor climber. Later used for instruction ship because of high factors of safety.
Ceiling	Sometimes designates highest point to which a certain ship will climb; again, the altitude of cloud banks or fog stratas obscuring ground vision.
Circus	Name applied to certain large air groups of the German army.

C.O.	Commanding Officer. Applied to any who command a unit.
Contour chasing	To fly low, following the contour of the ground and zooming over natural and artificial obstacles.
Crate	Derisively applied to any old, or badly worn plane, or to ship types not liked by the pilots.
Dawn patrols	Patrols going out for combat at dawn.
Dog-fighting	Wherein a number of planes engage in a free-for-all fight. Generally develops into an every-man-for-himself fight.
'Drome	Applied loosely to both hangars and landing fields. An air base.
E.A.	Enemy Aircraft.
Elephants	Semi-circular huts of steel, capable of being moved. So called, probably, because of color, and size.
Ferry pilot	A pilot used to fly ships from aviation pool or supply base up to active squadrons.

Finis la guerre	End of the war.
Flying pig	A large projectile from a type of mortar used by the Germans. Could be seen in flight and because of appearance and size were nicknamed "flying pigs."
Fokker	German plane. Very fast, good climber.
G. H. Q.	Great Headquarters.
G 2	Intelligence Department of Great Headquarters. Great Headquarters was divided into several groups, designated, for convenience, by lettered numerals, such as G 1, G 2 and G 3, etc.
G. I. cans	A large shell. Because of size and usual coat of grey paint, soldiers declared they resembled the galvanized iron cans used for garbage. Hence, G. I. Can.
G. O.	General Order.
Hedge hopping	Another name for contour chasing. Flying dangerously low and zooming over obstacles.

High-tail — A plane, when at highest speed possible straight ahead, carries its tail high. To high-tail means to go at highest rate of speed.

Immelmann — A sudden turn, reversing the direction. First used by a German aviator, Immelmann, and later used by all air pilots.

Intelligence — That section of Great Headquarters devoted to the handling of all spies and the collection of information concerning the enemy. The activities of the department are too great to be outlined in a brief definition.

Liaison — Contact, communication with. When several units are operating in unison, each dependent upon the other, the contact and coordination is called liaison —a French word.

Limey — Nickname for a British soldier.

Looie — A Lieutenant.

Observation balloon — A captive balloon, of sausage shape, carrying an observer whose duty it is to spot artillery fire, etc. The balloon is paid out on a cable attached to a winch. Such balloons are always given protecting ground batteries to ward off enemy planes.

Observation bus — Generally a two seated plane, carrying pilot and observer. Slower than pursuit planes, but more heavily armed.

O.D. — Olive drab; color of uniform.

Old Man — Captain, Major or Colonel. Usually applied to commander of the Units.

Panels — White muslin, cut into various shapes, to designate positions of various headquarters, such as Regiment, Brigade, etc. When spread on the ground, pilots could see them and report positions. It was extremely difficult to get ground units to display them, since enemy

	planes, seeing them, could give location to their artillery.
P.C.	Post of Command. Applied to any headquarters company on up.
Poilu	French private soldier.
Prop	Propeller.
Pursuit pilot	Pilot of combat plane.
Put the wind up	To frighten; to cause to lose courage or morale.
Reviving	To accelerate motor rapidly.
Ring sights	Type of sight designed to make it possible to get on a rapidly moving target. Much time was spent in training pilots in gunnery and proper understanding of ring sights.
R.F.C.	British Royal Flying Corps.
Saw bones	Army surgeon.
Sent west, Going west	To be killed, to die.
Side slipping	To slip off the wing.
Solo	First flight student pilot makes alone.

Spandau	German machine guns used on combat planes. Twin guns, frequently, with single control.
Stall	To climb so rapidly as to stall the motor, putting upon it a load heavier than it can continue to pull. If care is not taken to ease off, plane will go into a spin.
Tarmac	The line of departure on the field. Often applied to the entire field.
Toot sweet	*Tout de suite*—French phrase, adopted by Americans. Quickly, hurry up, at once.
Tri-plane	German planes, especially Fokker, had short fin-like projections under the usual planes, and while quite short, and not a true plane, gave the ship the name of tri-plane. Were quite fast, good climbers, and manoeuvred easily.
Upstairs	Generally applied to high altitude flights. Sometimes applied to any flight, regardless of altitude.

Very light pistol — A type of pistol used to fire a shell somewhat larger than a 12 gauge shotgun shell, and which contained luminous star signals, such as red stars, green stars, white stars, etc. The meaning of the signal depended upon the color and number of these floating stars.

Wash-out — To destroy, or badly damage a plane. Variously applied. Sometimes applied to planes obsoleted by the air service.

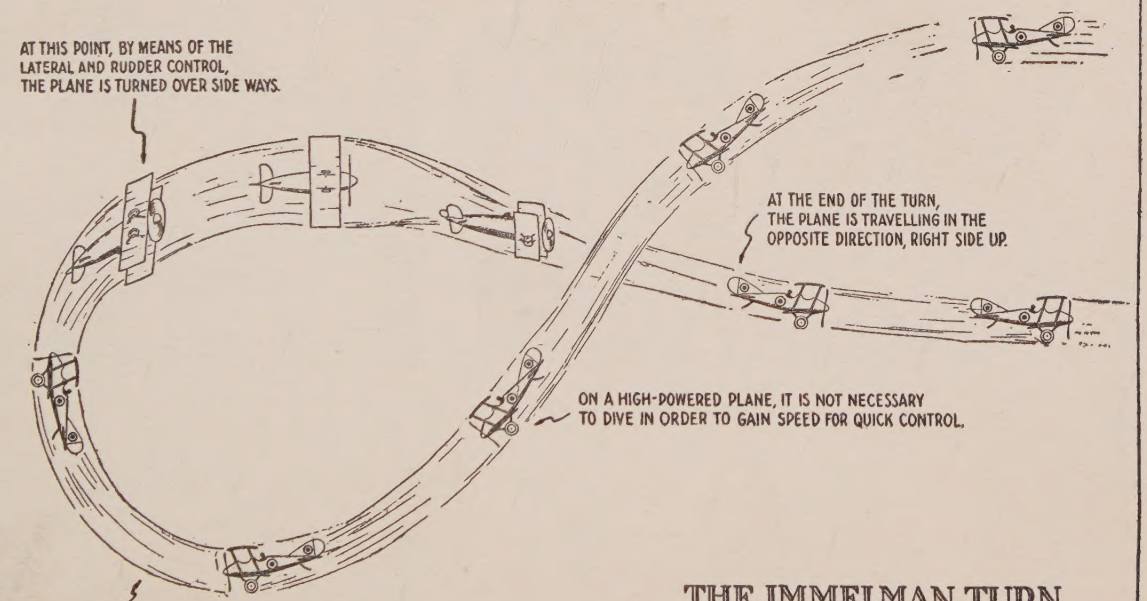
White roses — Allied anti-aircraft artillery used high-explosive, which showed white on bursting. Germans used black powder, which showed black.

Wind sock — A conical strip of cloth on a staff atop the hangars to give pilots wind direction.

Wipers — Nickname soldiers gave to Belgian town of Ypres.

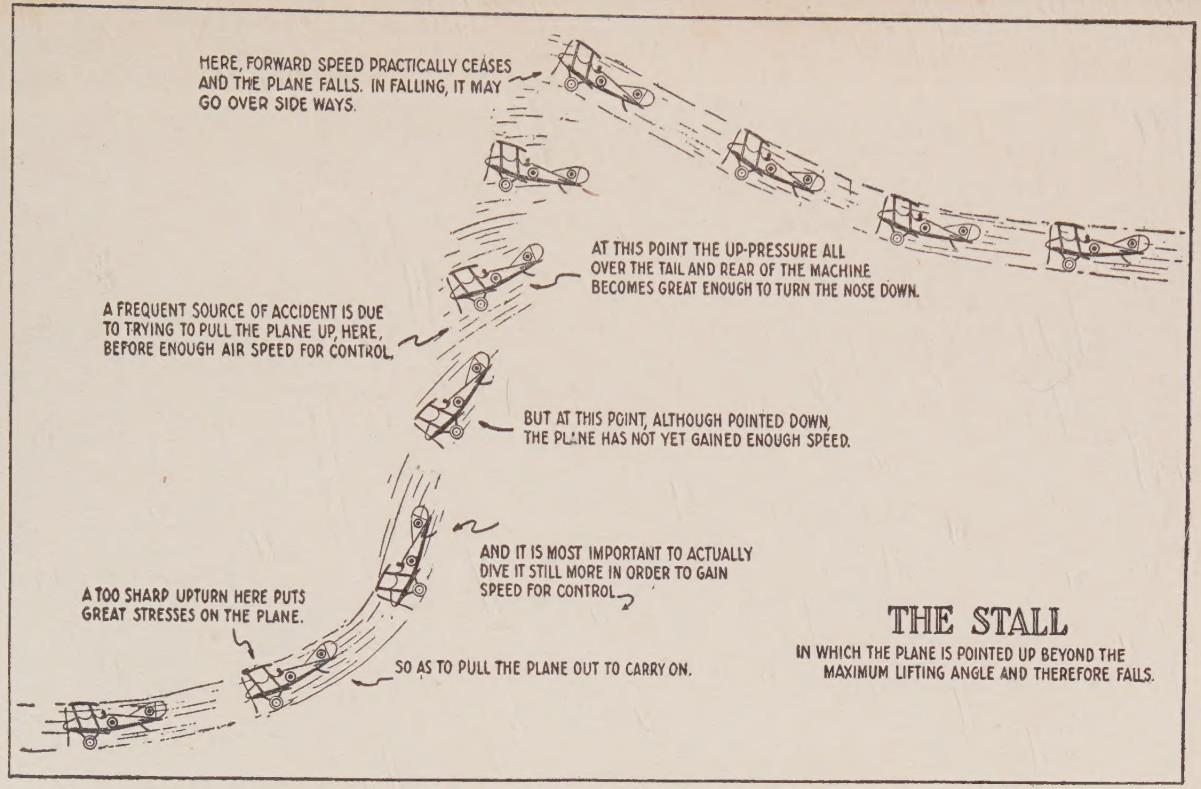
Yaw off — To slip off desired direction due to lack of speed or wind resistance.

Zoom — To pull the nose up sharply and climb at an angle too great to be long sustained.


AT THIS POINT, BY MEANS OF THE LATERAL AND RUDDER CONTROL, THE PLANE IS TURNED OVER SIDE WAYS.
AT THE END OF THE TURN, THE PLANE IS TRAVELLING IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION, RIGHT SIDE UP.
ON A HIGH-POWERED PLANE, IT IS NOT NECESSARY TO DIVE IN ORDER TO GAIN SPEED FOR QUICK CONTROL.
HERE THE PLANE GOES INTO AN ORDINARY LOOP.

THE IMMELMAN TURN

A QUICK WAY TO ABOUT FACE—
—A MANEUVER MUCH USED IN AIR FIGHTING


HERE, FORWARD SPEED PRACTICALLY CEASES AND THE PLANE FALLS. IN FALLING, IT MAY GO OVER SIDE WAYS.
AT THIS POINT THE UP-PRESSURE ALL OVER THE TAIL AND REAR OF THE MACHINE BECOMES GREAT ENOUGH TO TURN THE NOSE DOWN.
A FREQUENT SOURCE OF ACCIDENT IS DUE TO TRYING TO PULL THE PLANE UP, HERE, BEFORE ENOUGH AIR SPEED FOR CONTROL.
BUT AT THIS POINT, ALTHOUGH POINTED DOWN, THE PLANE HAS NOT YET GAINED ENOUGH SPEED.
AND IT IS MOST IMPORTANT TO ACTUALLY DIVE IT STILL MORE IN ORDER TO GAIN SPEED FOR CONTROL.
A TOO SHARP UPTURN HERE PUTS GREAT STRESSES ON THE PLANE.
SO AS TO PULL THE PLANE OUT TO CARRY ON.

THE STALL

IN WHICH THE PLANE IS POINTED UP BEYOND THE MAXIMUM LIFTING ANGLE AND THEREFORE FALLS.